What Can Philosophical Literature Do? The Contribution of Simone de Beauvoir

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
Romance Studies in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

“What Can Philosophical Literature Do? The Contribution of Simone de Beauvoir” examines Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist aesthetic theory of the philosophical novel alongside two fictional works, L’invitée (1943) and Le sang des autres (1945), which constitute Beauvoir’s first experiments in writing works of this hybrid genre. Throughout this dissertation, I mobilize Beauvoir’s theoretical and literary writing to challenge implied notions that literature somehow acts as a supplement to philosophy and that philosophical literature does not offer distinct advantages to the philosophical system.

In her theoretical writings on philosophical literature – including “Littérature et métaphysique” (1945), her auto-analysis of her novels in La Force de l’âge (1960), her contribution to the forum, Que peut la littérature? (1965), and her lecture, “Mon expérience d’écrivain” (1966) – Beauvoir confronts a potential impasse in the conception of the philosophical novel, which risks devolving into being either a roman à thèse or a concrete example of a pre-existing philosophical system. This aesthetic impasse becomes particularly acute when Beauvoir begins to write ethical fiction after WWII. This dissertation catalogs Beauvoir’s unique philosophical solutions to this aesthetic problem, and in turning to L’invitée and Le sang des autres, demonstrates that Beauvoir’s aesthetic innovations open up readings of her novels to new insights about her
contributions to twentieth-century literary and philosophical thought, including her thought on separation from the other – solipsism and skepticism – and on connection to the other – love, Mitsein, and reciprocal recognition.

In chapter one, I point to Beauvoir’s formulation of the philosophical-literary impasse in “Littérature et métaphysique” and enumerate how this impasse has worked its way into the critical reception of L’invitée. Beauvoir resolves this aesthetic problem through her concept of the philosophical-literary work as a particularly strong appeal to the reader’s freedom. In chapter two, I read L’invitée with Beauvoir’s aesthetic insights in mind, which has the effect of freeing Beauvoir’s novel from the philosophical binds of Sartre’s theory of the Look in L’être et le néant. In L’invitée, Beauvoir accounts for and also goes beyond conflict and domination by building a multiplicity of looks through her theme of spectacle in her novel (dance, theater). In chapter three, I show how Beauvoir’s turn to ethics and engaged literature after WWII once again raises the specter of the roman à thèse. I thus delineate the differences between engaged literature and the roman à thèse, differences which rely upon the existentialist notion of engaged literature as a dévoilement or unveiling of ethical issues. Finally, in chapter four I show the ways in which Le sang des autres both falls into the traps of the roman à thèse on the one hand and on the other resists that trap through its unveiling of her characters’ world as Mitsein and the ambiguous ethical problem of empathy within Mitsein.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Tim, and to my two baby girls, Sadie and Harper. The time spent away from you while writing this dissertation made me a better partner and mother, and the time spent with you away from this dissertation helped to keep me sane and happy. Here’s to hoping you all read it someday (Sadie and Harper, you’re off the hook at least until you learn to read).
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Introduction: Is Philosophical Literature Actually Philosophy, and Should We Want It to Be?

If philosophy can be thought of as the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself, then one mode of criticism (call it philosophical criticism) can be thought of as the world of a particular work brought to consciousness of itself.

- Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say?

The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space.

- Iris Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics

I would like to begin this dissertation with two anecdotes of my experience as a scholar working in the early 21st century on Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophical literature. The first occurred in the summer of 2010, nearly at the end of my project. In the library I found a collection of papers from a 1982 workshop sponsored by “The International Association for Philosophy and Literature” and “the Faculty of Humanities” at Middlesex Polytechnic. This workshop was entitled “The State of Literary Theory Today,” and one of its primary goals, according to the introduction, was “to point to certain ways forward for scholars and teachers concerned to develop an understanding of the nature of literature, philosophy, and discourse, and the links between them” (State of Literary Theory viii). The interest of this somewhat obscure collection to me should be obvious. I was looking for ways to conceptualize how a philosophical-literary work differs from traditional philosophical essays and from literary works that do not take philosophical questions as one of their primary concerns.

As I read through the collection, however, I found myself asking one seemingly
unrelated question about the vast majority of the contributions: Where is the literature in literary theory “today” (today in this case being 1982, although I do not believe the academic climate has changed much in this respect)? Many of the papers discussed abstract theories, including abstract philosophical theories, without ever discussing actual literary works. As if deigning to discuss a literary text were somehow unnecessary, irrelevant, or beneath most of these critics. In contrast, their choice to discuss only Derrida or Barthes implied these were the only forms of thought that were important. The subtext here was that theory and philosophy allowed them to ascend to a higher plane, one that went beyond mere literature and its non-theoretical descriptions of human life. As if literary theory were somehow something distinct from the literary form itself.

This caused me to think of another experience, one that occurred earlier in my graduate career in a distinctly non-academic setting, “The Federal” bar in Durham, North Carolina. Sometime in the early hours of the morning under the cloud of smoke that tends to hover in such places, a fellow graduate student told me in no uncertain terms that he had no respect for a particular academic institution because its high-powered female professors “tend to attract girls who like to do close readings.” Needless to say, since I am a girl who likes to do close readings, such a statement stung more than a little, and it has stuck with me over the years. As in the collection of academic essays on literature, philosophy, and discourse in which discussions of literary
texts were few and far between, this acquaintance (he was by no means a friend) was implying to me that actually reading a novel closely was at least uninteresting to him and at most beneath him. He, however, went one step further by linking such petty concerns with women, or, more pejoratively, girls because in our society even in her 20s and early 30s a woman is still a girl.

I responded differently to these two moments, and this difference, I believe, comes through the writing of my dissertation, through how my project on Simone de Beauvoir took shape. In the bar, I felt vaguely annoyed because I had an unarticulated sense that something important happened in the meticulous analysis of literary texts and that such analysis did not have to be disconnected from abstract theory and philosophy. In spite of myself, however, I wondered if my desire to look closely at scenes in novels was somehow outdated or inferior, something “we” as an academic collective had surpassed in a path to bigger and brighter things. As I read the collection of essays in the library, I realized that my dissertation on Beauvoir’s unique existentialist aesthetics had evolved into my articulation of what was important in reading actual literary texts, that Beauvoir had given me a way of imagining the interstices between literature and philosophy such that both were preserved as interesting, and that I no longer felt conflicted about doing close readings.

These anecdotes, in fact, get to the heart of why I have been drawn to Beauvoir and why I care both about her philosophical-literary works and her aesthetic theory. In
her novels, autobiographical works, play, and essays, Beauvoir was reaching for a way to speak about human experience as grounding the universal. In “Littérature et métaphysique” she says that the writings of French existentialists span so many different genres because they would like to “concilier l’objectif et le subjectif, l’absolu et le relatif, l’intemporel et l’historique” (81). This, she claims, is the goal of existentialist thought, and it is in the philosophical-literary work that she believes such reconciliation is possible. In other words, Beauvoir believed that there was value in the literary text, which she saw as being equal to the value of philosophy, and she imagined a hybrid aesthetic space, a genre in which the benefits of both kinds of writing would emerge, in which literature would strengthen philosophy and philosophy, literature.

Fittingly, her way of imagining this genre comes both through her theoretical writings and her literary works, and so this dissertation will take both kinds of writing as important. As my title suggests, one of the main points here is to examine an aspect of Beauvoir’s theoretical writings that has often gone unnoticed or ignored: her aesthetic writings on what literature is and what it can do. Beauvoir’s analyses of the literary form provide rich, complex aesthetic pictures that should be part of the narrative of aesthetic trends in the 20th century. As Toril Moi has noted, the lack of work on

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1 An analysis of this desire has led to excellent critical interpretations of the link between the personal and the philosophical in Beauvoir. If Beauvoir would like to speak of what it is to be a woman in Le deuxième sexe, for example, she feels that she must begin by turning to her own, personal experience. See, for example, Nancy Bauer, Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy & Feminism, Gender and Culture, eds. Carolyn G. Hielbrun and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), and Toril Moi, What Is a Woman? And Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
Beauvoir as a literary theorist represents a serious gap in Beauvoir studies, and this dissertation hopes to begin to fill that gap ("Beauvoir as Literary Theorist"). On the other hand, Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory calls for a particular kind of philosophical-literary criticism, and so I also hope to mobilize her aesthetic insights to provide original readings of how her novels bridge the gap between philosophy and literature. As I work through *L’invitée* and *Le sang des autres*, I uncover serious philosophical interventions into the question of how human beings can connect to one another, first as an ontological question about *l'être-pour-autrui* in *L’invitée* and then as an ethical question about empathy and how one should ethically react to the pain of the other in *Le sang des autres*. In these novels, Beauvoir enters into dialogue with philosophers from Descartes to Sartre to Heidegger and at once affirms their intuitions and rewrites and subverts them.

This dissertation treats Beauvoir’s unique aesthetic vision of a hybrid philosophical-literary genre, particularly the one she elaborates in her formative years, as a significant contribution to debates about what literature is and what it can do. These debates occur within Beauvoir scholarship as critics wrestle over whether or not – and more importantly how - Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary works count as or contribute to philosophy. The primary difficulty for these critics is to find a way to claim Beauvoir’s fiction as philosophy without saying that it is only an exemplification or direct refutation of a preexisting philosophical system. Conversely, literary critics of
Beauvoir’s work consistently worry that the incorporation of philosophical concerns into the literary text will in some way ruin its literary value. This anxiety about the tainting of a literary text by philosophical ideas – especially by ethical ideas - comes through in discussions of Beauvoir’s novels as potential romans à thèse or as “novels of ideas.”

These concerns within Beauvoir scholarship also mirror concerns in larger conversations about philosophical literature, as in the writings of Stanley Cavell, Martha Nussbaum, and Iris Murdoch, where the question of how a literary work can count as philosophy looms large. Furthermore, they overlap with more general concerns in realist, modernist, and post-modernist aesthetics about whether or not literature can or should have aims outside of itself, about the place of philosophy, ethics, and politics in literature. Twentieth century resistance to the idea that literature should reach so far comes as early as Julien Benda’s La Trahison des clercs and continues into Jean Ricardou’s rejection of literature as a source of information in his contribution to Que peut la littérature?² Such debates hover on the edges of this dissertation as I delineate where Beauvoir stands on these issues both in her theory and practice of literature.

² It almost goes without saying that Benda and Ricardou reject the concept of “la littérature engagée” for very different reasons. If I am mentioning them in the same breath here, it is to show the extensive range in critical resistance to ethical or political literature, at least in the form proposed by Beauvoir and Sartre. Benda, for example, does see literature as being able to weigh in on ethical questions, but only as a way of altering universal abstract conceptions of the good. He deplores any attempt by literary works to weigh in on ephemeral, concrete questions, which he considers petty, plebian concerns. This means that the literary writer should above all remain above the fray in battles over contemporary politics. In Ricardou, the point is to define a particularly literary form of language that is being used for creative renewal rather than for communicating information.
In this introduction, I thus hope to give an indication, however brief, of what these debates are in Beauvoir scholarship and how they open out onto debates about philosophical, ethical, and political literature. The first debate, which is the focus of chapters one and two, is whether or not literature can lay claim to philosophy, or, as Stanley Cavell asks in *The Claim of Reason*, “[C]an philosophy become literature and still know itself” (496). In studying Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory in chapter one and her first philosophical novel, *L’invitée*, in chapter two, this dissertation would thus like to assert Beauvoir as another voice that sees literature as valuable for philosophy precisely in the ways that it changes rigid conceptions about what philosophy is. In chapters three and four, I invert Cavell’s question on philosophy and literature. Rather than asking if philosophy can become literature and still know itself, I am asking if literature can become philosophy and still know itself. Or rather, these chapters address whether or not literature can speak to a specific branch of philosophy – ethics – and still know itself. Once again, my chapter division is such that I first treat Beauvoir’s aesthetic writings that are relevant to the question of ethics in literature before turning to how Beauvoir mobilizes her novel *Le sang des autres* to engage ethical questions.

Having delineated a breakdown of the chapters, I will now relate Cavell’s question and its inversion to Beauvoir scholarship, Beauvoir’s ideas, and larger aesthetic ideas about philosophical literature. What Cavell seems to asking is this: Is there something in the literary project that so seriously deforms the goals of philosophy that
fictional works simply should be of little or no interest to the philosopher? As I show in my first chapter, the answer to this question depends largely on what those asking it mean by philosophy. If by philosophy they mean a rational, abstract argument about such universal questions as being, the other, ethics, etc. – in other words a perfect analogue of the traditional philosophical system like G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* or Jean-Paul Sartre’s *L’être et le néant* – then asking the open-ended, concrete novel to become philosophy proves practically impossible.

This kind of demand for philosophical literature – that it should perfectly reflect the goals of the philosophical system – results in several ways of reading Beauvoir. In the first, critics recognize the fact that even abstract philosophical systems often illustrate their point through the use of more or less concrete anecdotes. In the second, Beauvoir writes philosophical allegories in which different characters represent the ideas of a philosophical system, usually in order to unearth the problems that such ideas create in the “real” world. Beauvoir’s novels thus become philosophy by providing an extended philosophical anecdote to compliment an existing philosophical system or, in some cases, to reject that system. Her novels, in other words, appear as a supplement to a traditional philosophical argument.

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3 Such anecdotes are all over *L’être et le néant*, for example, and even Hegel’s highly obscure and abstract *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins to sketch a theory of intersubjectivity through the master-slave dialectic, a narrative of two men/consciousnesses in a battle for dominance. Although this battle is metaphysical, it is also quite physical – each tries to kill the other – and it ends in real and abstract servitude.

4 Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, in fact, could be construed more as this kind of philosophical allegory. I highlight these ways of understanding Beauvoir’s novels in more detail in chapter one. For specific examples of each position, see chapter 1, pp. 31-33 and 37-40.
Such a way of thinking about the relationship between literature and philosophy clearly places Beauvoir’s novels in a subordinate position to philosophical texts. It is also, however, more appealing than one of the alternatives, which is to ignore Beauvoir’s significant philosophical contributions and disregard Beauvoir as a philosopher because her form does not look familiar enough to count as philosophy. Of course, such a blindness to Beauvoir’s particular kind of philosophy is compounded by the fact that she is a woman. Up until the renaissance in studies of Beauvoir as a philosopher that began in the late 1980s and continued into the 90s, even Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe*, which contained countless philosophical terms and groundbreaking philosophical thought, went largely unrecognized as a significant philosophical intervention. And yet while this may seem to be the alternative, it really is part of the same narrative about Beauvoir’s work. As Michèle Le Dœuff demonstrates, a reticence to accept women into the coterie of male philosophers has ended up painting Beauvoir’s work as a derivative of Sartre’s with *L'être et le néant* and *Le deuxième sexe* representing exactly the same philosophy (except that Beauvoir applied Sartre’s tenets to the problem of women). In

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many cases, the same could be said of Beauvoir’s novels, which have been read as examples of Sartre’s thought. For this reason, Le Doeuff argues, Beauvoir has become “une philosophe formidablement cachée” (Étude 157).

As Margaret Simons has pointed out, Beauvoir does not do much to counteract this sexist omission by effectively hiding herself as a philosopher (Simons “Impasse”). Beauvoir repeatedly insists that Sartre was the true philosopher while she wrote literary works. In La Force de l’âge, for example, Beauvoir writes that while she could easily absorb others’ philosophical systems, her “manque d’inventivité” barred her from writing what few “esprits véritablement créateurs” ever accomplish: a philosophical system (254). For this reason, she famously says, “[J]e ne me considérais pas comme une philosophe... [J]e savais que c’était vers la littérature que je devais m’orienter” (254-55). She reaffirms this sentiment in 1979 in an interview in which she says: “Sartre was a philosopher, and me, I am not; and I never really wanted to be a philosopher. I like philosophy very much, but I have not constructed a philosophical work. I constructed a literary work” (Simons Origins of Existentialism 9).

For Simons, statements like these are just part of a pattern in which Beauvoir actively works to erase her contributions to philosophy and to efface herself behind Sartre. Simons thus argues that current Beauvoir scholars should have the courage to

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6 Simons has done a lot of groundbreaking work with Simone de Beauvoir’s student diaries, posthumously published as her Cahiers de jeunesse. See, for example, Simons, Origins of Existentialism 185-254. As is the case with these other interventions, Simons uses the Cahiers to demonstrate that Beauvoir was developing
“read Beauvoir such as she is” ("Impasse" 15) without idealizing her, without taking everything she says about herself to be the absolute truth.7 In other words, current Beauvoir scholars should affirm that Beauvoir was a philosopher and read her work – even her literary work - as philosophy.

I agree with Simons on one point: Beauvoir’s repeated claims that she was not a philosopher simply do not reflect Beauvoir’s actual oeuvre. Still, too many Beauvoir critics do not read her “such as she is.” By attempting to claim that her philosophical-literary works simply were philosophy tout court, they ignore the distinct advantages offered by Beauvoir’s hybrid genre. Implicit in such readings is a hierarchy between philosophy and literature in which philosophy is the higher pursuit while literature remains the lower. If philosophy has traditionally been the domain of men while literature is open to (but, let’s admit it, never dominated by) women, claiming work like Beauvoir’s for the philosophical cannon certainly helps undo patriarchal oppression. We should certainly question an academic climate that bars women’s access to philosophy, but we should also question the hierarchy that ranks philosophy above literature in the first place. This is what Beauvoir’s work does.

Take, for example, Beauvoir’s infamous denial that she was not a philosopher in its context in La Force de l’âge:

7 This idea of “reading Beauvoir such as she is” is actually Le Dœuff’s, which Simons takes up in her article. See Michele Le Dœuff, “Engaging with Simone de Beauvoir,” trans. Nancy Bauer, The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006) 15.
Je ne me considérais pas comme une philosophe ; je savais très bien que mon aisance à entrer dans un texte venait précisément de mon manque d’inventivité. Dans ce domaine, les esprits véritablement créateurs sont si rares qu’il est oiseux de me demander pourquoi je n’essayai pas de prendre rang parmi eux : il faudrait plutôt expliquer comment certains individus sont capables de mener à bien ce délire concerté qu’est un système et d’où leur vient l’entêtement qui donne à leurs aperçus la valeur de clés universelles. J’ai dit déjà que la condition féminine ne dispose pas à ce genre d’obstination. (Force de l’âge 254)

Yes, for modern feminists like Simons and me, it is nothing short of cringe-worthy that Beauvoir presents Sartre as one of those rare “esprits créateurs” who builds a philosophical system from the ground up while she casts herself as a diligent and perspicacious student who absorbs and analyzes what others think. Even so, she is also seriously questioning the impulse to write philosophical systems like L’être et le néant, and she specifically singles Sartre out as being unable to see beyond himself, which means that she “comprenai[t] les doctrines philosophiques. . .plus vite et plus exactement que lui” (Force de l’âge 253). If writers of grand philosophical systems (and implicitly Sartre) demonstrate a stubborn inability to leave their own viewpoint behind, this also causes them to confuse their viewpoint with the universal and to forget their situated existence in a particular time, space, and subjectivity. Beauvoir, as a woman, has a difficult time forgetting this fact, and it is not because women naturally have no capacity for understanding the universal but rather because in their experience within a patriarchal society, men consistently deny them the right to speak from the position of the universal. In this instance, Beauvoir’s “la condition féminine” takes the place of “la
condition humaine,” at once invoking a constructed universal image of how human beings are and showing that women are held outside of it.⁸

I, therefore, am going to take Beauvoir’s assertions that she was not a philosopher very seriously, with the caveat that Beauvoir seemed to be rejecting a very specific way of doing philosophy.⁹ That she was not ready to call herself a philosopher was unfortunate, for she could have better articulated that she did not want to be a philosopher in the traditional sense but rather a writer of philosophical-literary works. In this way she would not have hidden her very serious contributions to philosophy. Still, I would like to insist on the following point: while Beauvoir’s literary writing may be philosophical, it remains literature, and we do not have to assume that her decision to write literary works means she was accepting an inferior position. In taking Beauvoir “such as she is,” we should not discount her insistence that she was first and foremost a writer of literary works, and we should not take her statements that she turned to literature to mean that she turned away from philosophy. When Beauvoir says that she saw the literary form as the one that was best suited for her project, we as critics should not assume that she was saying she wanted to write purely literary works or that she was merely accepting the role of novelist that had been designated for those of her sex (with

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⁸ In *Le deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir employs a similar tactic when she changes “la réalité humaine,” the French translation of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, to “la réalité féminine” (32).
⁹ Eleanore Holveck makes this claim as well, but my conception of what Beauvoir would like in the philosophical-literary work paints Beauvoir as being much less hostile to abstract philosophy than Holvek’s does. See Eleanore Holveck, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 3-5. See also pp. 51-54 in chapter 1 of this dissertation for a discussion of how Holveck understands Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory of the philosophical novel.
all the condescension that this “merely” suggests for literature in comparison to philosophy).

What Beauvoir is trying to accomplish in turning to literature is a way of reaching to the universal through the singular, a way of passing, as she puts it in “Mon expérience d’écrivain,” from her “je” to the universal without confounding the two ("Expérience" 440-41). In turning to literature, therefore, she does not want to write an analogue of a philosophical system, whether that system is L’être et le néant or one of her own creation. Time and again in her aesthetic writings, Beauvoir stands as a staunch defender of the literary work as unique, as “un mode de communication irréductible à tout autre” ("Littérature et métaphysique" 72). Beauvoir thus sees serious advantages to the philosophical-literary form because it presents philosophy as a person lives it, in all its ambiguity, and also because it presents philosophy as emerging from a singular, situated experience. For Beauvoir, philosophical-literature thus becomes an appeal to the reader’s freedom rather than an argument, and it becomes a dévoilement or “unveiling” of philosophical meaning as human meaning, as meaning that arises within the context of a person’s finitude. Getting clear on what exactly she means by these existentialist aesthetic concepts of the appeal and dévoilement will be the primary purpose of chapters one and three of this dissertation respectively, but for the purposes of this introduction it is worth noting that both allow her literary works to be literary works that enter into philosophical debates all while avoiding the claim that those
literary works are *exactly* like a philosophical system. Instead, these literary works lay claim to philosophy by radically altering it, by, in Beauvoir’s estimation and mine, improving it.

Of course, Beauvoir also believed that in speaking with the philosophical tradition, she improved her literary works as well. In other words, this is not an either/or proposition in which she must either affirm the value of literature and denigrate philosophy or vice versa. For Beauvoir, literary works represent a form in which she could have her say about philosophical beliefs, ethical quandaries, and political ideologies. Her aesthetic vision implied that literary works could communicate about these aspects of human life to her public, and increasingly after the Second World War she saw literature as an act within her world that could potentially change the situation that she shared with others. She saw literature, in other words, as an ethical act, as “a committed work.” Beauvoir thus writes what Sartre would call “la littérature engagée” in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, and implicit in this vision of literature was the idea that the literary word was a real intervention in the world. Even if she and Sartre had not yet formulated the theory of “littérature engagée,” she wrote her novels of the immediate postwar period – which she called her “période morale” (*Force de l’âge* 625) - as an ethical intervention.

If Beauvoir makes the case for the possibility that literature could extend beyond itself into realms usually reserved for the ethical philosopher, however, not everyone
would agree that it should, and a reticence to accept this aesthetic vision emerges in the literary criticism of Beauvoir’s “moral period.” Critics from Maurice Blanchot to Elizabeth Fallaize question whether or not her novels of this time were à thèse, and many took issue with how novels like *Le sang des autres* were, to use Terry Keefe’s phrase, “over-stuffed with moral matter” ("Literature and Existentialist Ethics" 255). Blanchot’s response to *Le sang des autres*, which Beauvoir takes up in *La Force de l’âge*, is particularly telling in this respect. It indicates that the critical response to Beauvoir’s moral literary works could have emerged either from a flaw within her construction of the work – from a certain didactic and unambiguous way that she presented literary arguments – or from aesthetic theories that demand for literature to remain drawn in upon itself.

Blanchot does not critique the project to write committed literature in general, and of all the works he considers – which include *La nausée* and the first two volumes of *Les chemins de la liberté* by Sartre and *L’invitée* and *Le sang des autres* by Beauvoir – he only finds fault with *Le sang des autres*. He then makes clear that he does not feel one can dismiss the roman à thèse simply because it purports to talk about something beyond the literary. He asks:

> On peut se demander pourquoi le roman à thèse a mauvaise réputation. Du côté de l’œuvre, les objections... sont... catégoriques. Toutefois, elles ne sont fortes que dans une certaine conception de l’œuvre d’art, celle du XIXe siècle finissant selon laquelle l’art, étant un absolu, ne doit pas avoir sa fin en dehors de soi. (188)

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Blanchot also agrees with the assertion at the heart of committed literature - that no art is truly absolute, that all art makes a political statement even when it claims to talk only about its hermetic relationship with itself. “Et l’art le plus pur,” Blanchot writes, “qui ne sait aujourd’hui qu’il est le plus impur, rendu coupable par son innocence, art de propagande parce que désintéressé” (189). This statement questions the foundations of an aesthetic that claims that art should not have goals beyond itself but then finds that *L’invitée* still fails as a literary work because it demonstrates truths rather than showing or gesturing toward meaning (in French the opposition is between *démontrer* and *signifier*).  

If Beauvoir infamously agrees with Blanchot in *La Force de l’âge*, it is not only because she, like Blanchot, rejects the basic tenet that literature could remain within its own limits. It is also because she agrees with Blanchot’s subtle distinction between showing meaning and demonstrating truth. As her aesthetic theory in her contribution to *Que peut la littérature?* and “Mon expérience d’écrivain” shows, Beauvoir would like literature to unveil (*dévoiler*) meaning, not foist it upon the reader as a universal truth. As an existentialist term, unveiling points to the fact that all meaning in the world arises within the context of a particular subjectivity. This means that authors of philosophical-literary works can write literary works that act as ethical interventions, but they must do

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11 Here Blanchot falls in line with statements made by Beauvoir and Sartre that “art for art’s sake” serves bourgeois interests by refusing to examine political and social problems and thus implicitly upholding the status quo and conservative values.
so by highlighting how ethical arguments arise within the imperfect and limited context of human experience.

These specific debates within Beauvoir scholarship open out onto aesthetic debates about philosophical and ethical literature in particular and onto the larger aesthetic trends of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Within larger debates about philosophy and literature, those who ask literature to provide an analogue to the traditional philosophical system in order to count as philosophy face similar difficulties.

In an interview where she discusses the relationship between philosophy and literature, for example, Iris Murdoch, who is herself a philosopher and a novelist, gives a narrow definition of philosophy similar to the one at work in *La Force de l’âge*:

I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration. Of course, this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice. (4-5)

Philosophers, on Murdoch’s reading, should explicitly situate themselves in relation to previous philosophical arguments (10), eliminate the personal from their writing (5), cut beauty, instinct, and emotion out of their cold, clear arguments (7), and instead dedicate themselves to “a very odd unnatural activity” (8). This leads Murdoch in effect to bar the possibility that philosophy could happen in literature:

I see no “general role” of philosophy in literature... Of course writers are influenced by the ideas of their time and may be interested in
philosophical change, but the amount of philosophy they succeed in expressing is likely to be small. (18-19)

The implications of views like Murdoch’s is that Beauvoir was not a philosopher and that her literary works do not express anything that could be characterized as philosophy. This way of defining philosophy (a definition shared by Beauvoir in La Force de l’âge) effectively hides philosophers like Beauvoir who, due to their “condition féminine,” have not been able to speak with this “ideal” philosophical voice. Such a definition also bars the true recognition of how rich philosophical-literary works could speak to traditional philosophers, of how philosophical-literary works could tell them something that perhaps they do not know about their deepest questions.

Murdoch provides an equally limiting conception of what literature is, and this conception is related to her idea that literary works cannot have a say in philosophical debates. It must be admitted that some of her statements would fit within a Beauvoirian aesthetic of philosophical literature. She affirms the strengths of literature as being its beauty, its ability to express ordinary, everyday life, and to connect human beings. Like Beauvoir, she also warns that the incorporation of philosophy, ethics, or politics into literature could ruin its aesthetic value and create instead “a branch of propaganda” (16). Unlike Beauvoir, however, she believes that the project to change the world through literature almost certainly turns literature into propaganda. Murdoch thus says that “[a]s soon as a writer says to himself, ‘I must try to change society in such and such ways,’ he is likely to damage his work” (17), and she justifies this statement by affirming
that “it is important. . . to preserve the purity and independence of the practice of art” (18). For Murdoch, literature cannot find its inspiration in the kinds of ethical/political concerns that motivate, for example, Beauvoir’s feminism, socialism, or anti-racism.

Murdoch is not alone in making the demand that literature retain its independence, and in fact today, it is Beauvoir’s view of literature as philosophical, ethical, and political action that is considered outmoded or dépassé (I like the implication of the French word here as something we have passed by). As Susan Rubin Suleiman’s work on the roman à thèse has found, in conflating the existentialist project to unveil ethical meaning with the realist thesis novelist’s project to demonstrate ethical truths, modern critics have hastily discounted existentialist aesthetics. Suleiman writes:

Modern criticism has been tremendously wary of any literary work that “means to say something” (that has a “message”), and of any critic or reader who reads literature as an “attempt to say something” – who reads it for its “message.” The Sartrian dream of transparent language (“there is prose. . . when the word passes through our gaze like glass traversed by sunlight”) has been replaced, in contemporary avant-garde criticism, by Mallarmé’s dream of language as a mirror of itself... This substitution (where the pertinent opposition is... between “literary” language and “ordinary” language, or between literature and communication) has had as one of its consequences the devalorization of a whole vast field of literature. (18)

It is no coincidence that Suleiman cites Sartre as standing in opposition to this dominant trend, for when one considers the French existentialists as literary theorists, one sees that they belong within the “vast field of literature” whose value has come into question. Both Beauvoir and Sartre, after all, are among those who believe in the “‘outmoded’
notion that literature is an act of communication between writer and reader” (Suleiman 18), and it is this unpopular notion that provides the theoretical ground for the committed project.

This aesthetic division between the existentialists and the postmodernists emerges beautifully in the debates in *Que peut la littérature?*, which was a conference conceived exactly at the time when both the *nouveau roman* and existentialist ideas of committed literature enjoyed equal academic prowess. Thus Sartre and Beauvoir consistently argue that literature is communication and action while Ricardou argues that literature should not descend into becoming mere information. In giving an account of the existentialist notion of unveiling ethical meaning in chapter three, therefore, I am asking that we dust off this existentialist aesthetic notion and examine whether or not it actually presents the universalizing description of “objective” reality that proponents of the *nouveau roman* decried.

Those who succeed in claiming literary works as having something to say to philosophy depart implicitly or explicitly from these demands that literature, in order to count as philosophy, should offer something akin to Murdoch’s ideal philosophical voice, and that literature, in order to succeed as art, should remain “pure.” This thus leads us to voices that resonate with Beauvoir’s more than Murdoch’s or Ricardou’s in the debate on philosophical literature: Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell.

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12 Toril Moi points out that this is the context of *Que peut la littérature?* in Toril Moi, ”What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist,” *PMLA* 124.1 (2009): 190-91.
In *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Martha Nussbaum consistently argues that literary style and form count and should not be discarded like a package surrounding philosophical content. If literary works should find their way into philosophy classes, as Nussbaum argues they should, it is because they offer something that philosophy alone cannot provide:

Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth. But this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expositional structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident – but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises... If these views are serious candidates for truth... then it seems that this language and these forms ought to be included within philosophy. (3-4)

For Nussbaum as for Murdoch, therefore, literature does not provide the same kind of knowledge that traditional philosophy does – and Nussbaum offers similar differences that have to do with arguments, emotions, beauty, form, etc. – but Nussbaum still sees philosophical literature as a valid pursuit and a valid object of study for philosophers. In order to do so, Nussbaum must expand the definition of a philosopher beyond the recognizable writer of a grand system to be one who writes as a way of “pursuing
understanding” (3). All of these concerns that Nussbaum raises – concerns with the benefits of literary form, with literature as a statement of philosophical truth that does not take the form of a proof, with the benefit to philosophy of paying attention to particulars – are concerns in Beauvoir’s existentialist aesthetics. In paying attention to these concerns, Nussbaum also, as Beauvoir does, characterizes literature as a distinct form of knowledge that is not philosophy as it is conceived in very narrow terms but that has something important to say to philosophy at the same time.

In the same vein, Stanley Cavell asks for something more of and for philosophy in turning to Shakespeare’s King Lear in “The Avoidance of Love.”13 It is significant that out of all philosophers, the one who has decided to study Shakespeare as a philosophical intervention is Stanley Cavell. An ordinary language philosopher, Cavell already stands on the edge of the discipline, writing a kind of philosophy that radically questions the way that philosophers write. In justifying his turn to Shakespeare, Cavell writes that studying literature as being philosophically significant is part of the overall project of ordinary language philosophy. Cavell sees the literary project as being important because, in his words:

[In ordinary language philosophy] the problem is... raised of determining the data from which philosophy proceeds and to which it appeals, and specifically the issue is one of placing the words and experiences with which philosophers have always begun in alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to

13 “The Avoidance of Love” is a chapter in Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? : A Book of Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words.  
("Avoidance" 270)

What Stanley Cavell is doing with King Lear – he calls it “philosophical criticism” 
("Avoidance" 313) – is also inherently a criticism of philosophy as it is typically done. 
Part of the purpose of looking at Shakespeare, therefore, is this bringing of philosophy 
back into its singular, everyday context and out of a metaphysical realm that has no 
connection to the way we live our everyday lives. Once again, this critique of 
philosophy and affirmation of the value of literature shines through in Beauvoir’s 
philosophical-literary project, which tethers philosophical meanings to the context of the 
concrete world, to how people create and live those meanings. 

Another way that Cavell and Nussbaum’s conversations connect with Beauvoir’s 
is their insistence either that the literary text is a particularly fertile ground for studying 
questions of morality and ethics (Nussbaum) or that it provides a fertile ground for 
studying love, recognition, empathy, and skepticism (Nussbaum and Cavell). In her 
preface Nussbaum defines her project in the following way: 

The essays [that follow] argue for a conception of ethical understanding 
that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity and gives a certain 
type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, 
rather than to abstract rules. They argue that this conception, rather than 
being imprecise and irrational, is actually superior in rationality and in 
the relevant sort of precision. They argue, further, that this ethical 
conception finds its most appropriate expression and statement in certain 
forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical – and that if 
we wish to take it seriously we must broaden our conception of moral 
philosophy in order to include these texts inside it. (ix)
Implicitly affirming what Nussbaum is saying, Cavell consistently turns to literature and film as a way of deciding questions about love and skepticism, as a way, in other words, to talk about connections between human beings that have to do with empathy.\textsuperscript{14}

The impulse in Nussbaum and Cavell to study literary texts with philosophy in mind – what Cavell calls philosophical criticism - is significant. It suggests that the existentialist aesthetic conception of philosophical literature calls not only for a very particular way of writing novels but also of reading them. This is the point of Beauvoir’s insistence that in order to work, a philosophical-literary text must not only be “honnêtement écrit” but also “[h]onnêtement lu” (“Littérature et métaphysique” 84). It is for this reason that I dedicate two chapters in my dissertation to studying actual literary texts closely not only for their particularly literary way of telling the truth but also for how they can intervene in philosophy. These novels by Beauvoir call out to be read in the spirit in which they were written.\textsuperscript{15} They call out to be read as literary works, with a particular attention to form and ambiguity, but they also call out to be read as works which have a significant philosophical say and which deserve to be in dialogue with such thinkers as Descartes, Hegel, Sartre, and Heidegger. In a way, as an answer

\textsuperscript{14} Cavell discusses how metaphysical problems take a discussion of pain away from actually doing something about that pain to asking about how I can know that the other is in pain. See, for example, Cavell’s discussion of a man with a toothache in Stanley Cavell, \textit{The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 67-70. See also the chapter entitled “The Avoidance of Love” in Cavell, \textit{Must We Mean}, in which Cavell uses philosophical criticism to discuss recognition between two subjects in \textit{King Lear}.

\textsuperscript{15} Out of all the critics who read Beauvoir’s work, I find that some of her existentialist colleagues do this kind of criticism particularly well. See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le roman et la métaphysique,” \textit{Sens et non-sens} (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), Francis Jeanson, \textit{Simone de Beauvoir ou l’entreprise de vivre} (Paris: Seuil, 1966).
to the philosophical-literary appeal in these novels, my analysis imposes a new form on these works and gives them a new truth. This analysis does not bring literature back to philosophy, however, even though I add in arguments, make hidden connections clear, and make links between the way Beauvoir’s characters understand their world and traditional philosophical systems. My analysis tries not to erase the novel’s ambiguity or make it into an argument but rather sustains the different, often competing threads within the novels and shows how these threads at once affirm and subvert the philosophical voices that she engages.

If I have chosen Beauvoir’s first two novels as subjects of intense study, it is precisely because Beauvoir is working out her aesthetic picture as she writes them. They are her first mostly successful attempts to write a novel that reaches outside of itself toward philosophy (L’invitée) and then to write a novel that reaches toward ethics and through ethics, politics (Le sang des autres). I say “mostly successful” here because it is in writing these novels that her aesthetic theory most certainly took shape, and especially in the case of Le sang des autres, she was not quite satisfied with the result. In a letter to her American lover Nelson Algren in 1948, for example, she wrote about her frustration with Le sang des autres:

I guess you are right when you say there is too much philosophy, but that is my genuine way of feeling; when anything happens to me I am always ratiocinating about it inside myself, it is all mixed: feeling, events and philosophy, it would be rather unnatural for me if I put it away.... In fact, I should be rather at a loss if I had to write a novel now. I see the mistakes in the old ones, yet I don’t want to give up my own way of
feeling and I don’t know how I could do really well what I want.  
*Transatlantic Love Affair* 212-13)

Significantly, the next novel that she wrote after this letter was *Les mandarins*, which met universal critical acclaim and which has produced an entire collection of essays on its philosophical preoccupations. And yet, for the purposes of this study, I find it more interesting to look at the moment when Beauvoir was still searching for “her own way of saying” for it is when the philosophical-literary genre causes her problems that the problems and her solution become clear.

It is also significant that Nussbaum and Cavell include “love” in the titles of their works and that Cavell speaks of the possibility of the failure of love, of the failure of empathy, and of skepticism. In the chapters where I analyze her literary texts, Beauvoir was reaching through her novels toward the philosophical question of solipsism, or the denial that other minds exist outside of the self. I will let these novels speak for themselves in chapters two and four, and here I will note that in both cases Beauvoir struggles to find what she was asking for in philosophical literature: a way to connect to others and thus create a universal without losing the self or the other in the process. As she does so, her philosophical-literary works end up looking surprisingly like her description of how she, as a “non-philosopher,” studies philosophy:

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16 As Algren did not speak French, Beauvoir wrote all her letters in English, and the editors of *A Transatlantic Love Affair* decided not to correct her mistakes in English grammar or vocabulary in order to maintain the text as Algren would have read it.

Ma pensée se modelait tout de suite sur celle que j’essayais de saisir ; je ne l’accueillais pas passivement : dans la mesure même où j’y adhérais, j’en apercevais les lacunes, les incohérences, comme aussi j’en pressentais les possibles développements ; si une théorie me convainquait, elle ne me restait pas extérieure ; elle changeait mon rapport au monde, elle colorait mon expérience. Bref, j’avais de solides facultés d’assimilation, un sens critique développé, et la philosophie était pour moi une réalité vivante. Elle me donnait des satisfactions sur lesquelles je ne me blasai jamais. *(Force de l’âge 254)*

Hence in *L’invitée* Beauvoir incorporates some basic truths from Descartes about solipsism and from Sartre about *l’être-pour-autrui*, molds herself to them, asserts them as being true, and then beautifully exposes their shortcomings and moves beyond them. In writing philosophical-literary works, then, Beauvoir was a philosopher, but she was the kind of philosopher who asked philosophy to step outside of itself, to step beyond itself, and hoped philosophy would still recognize itself. She was also a novelist who asked literature to reach beyond itself, to have a say in philosophy, ethics, and politics, while still recognizing itself as literature. Neither proposition was easy, and this dissertation hopes to show how Beauvoir, as an aesthetic theorist and a novelist, points the way to achieving them both.
1. Simone de Beauvoir’s Aesthetic Theory of the Philosophical Novel: From the Philosophical Argument to the Philosophical-Literary Appeal

Ce n’est pas un hasard si la pensée existentialiste tente de s’exprimer aujourd’hui, tantôt par des traités théoriques, tantôt par des fictions : c’est qu’elle est un effort pour concilier l’objectif et le subjectif, l’absolu et le relatif, l’intemporel et l’historique ; elle prétend saisir l’essence au cœur de l’existence ; et si la description de l’essence relève de la philosophie proprement dite, seul le roman permettra d’évoquer dans sa vérité complète, singulièrer, temporelle, le jaillissement originel de l’existence.

- Simone de Beauvoir, “Littérature et métaphysique”

L’œuvre d’un grand romancier est toujours portée par deux ou trois idées philosophiques. Soit par exemple le Moi et la Liberté chez Stendhal, chez Balzac le mystère de l’histoire comme apparition d’un sens dans le hasard des événements, chez Proust l’enveloppement du passé dans le présent et la présence du temps perdu. La fonction du romancier n’est pas de thématiser ces idées, elle est de les faire exister devant nous à la manière des choses.

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le roman et la métaphysique”

1.1 Introduction: Does Writing a Good Novel Mean that One Must Abandon Philosophy?

In her “Philosophy and the literary medium: The existentialist predicament,”

Amy. M. Kleppner considers the viability of the French existentialist project to write philosophical novels. She asks:

[It]s it possible to satisfy the requirements for a successful work of imaginative literature and an acceptable philosophical system at the same time, in the same piece of writing? Or are these incompatible demands that doom such attempts to failure, by virtue of inherent differences between the literary and the philosophical enterprise? (214)

Kleppner thus suggests that there is an inherent tension between the philosophical and the literary project, and at the end of her article Kleppner concludes that this tension is not fully resolvable. If an author would like her novel to be philosophy, Kleppner
reasons, she must put forth a strong, clear, and original argument. This argument, in turn, weakens the novel’s artistic value, for literary critics tend to value ambiguity in a fictional work, and they label fiction with too strong a philosophical, ethical, or moral message as being nothing more than a thesis novel or roman à thèse.¹ On the other hand, if the author would like her novel to have artistic value, she must abandon the possibility of a new philosophical argument and instead exemplify a position supported elsewhere, in a traditional philosophical format.

As Kleppner’s argument is forceful and well-constructed, it should in the least trouble any scholar hoping to study the contributions that philosophical literature can make to the overall field of philosophy. Within the context of her argument, that contribution is clearly limited, for the only way that philosophical literature can engage the tradition is to make preexisting abstract philosophical concepts clearer by providing concrete examples. As I have argued in my introduction, philosophical literature, then, would seem to be a supplement to philosophy, something that a philosopher would study in order to clarify what she already knows about a given philosophical system. If the philosophical novelist tries to do more, if she tries, for example, to posit new philosophical theories or offer new ideas to the tradition, she would inevitably fall into

¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman’s book entitled Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre gives an excellent definition of the roman à thèse and her work will provide a theoretical basis for comparing the roman à thèse with the existentialist ideal of the committed literary work in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation. See pp. 122-25 of this dissertation for a discussion of Suleiman’s definition and its relation to the evaluation of Le sang des autres.
Kleppner’s contradiction, for she would have to write a roman à thèse, and her work
would be a literary failure.

Such notions about how a novel can count as philosophy do not seem to be
limited to Kleppner. When critics discuss Simone de Beauvoir’s first existential novel,
_L’invitée_, for example, the most common way that they picture the role of philosophy
within the novel is to say that Beauvoir first absorbs existing philosophical systems, then
creates a concrete example of those systems within her fictional narrative, and finally
demonstrates either that the system holds in the real world or that its metaphysical
abstractions make no sense in the life of one of her characters. In other words, critics
often imagine fiction as a concrete example or as a test in the concrete of established
philosophical doctrines. In both cases, there is a behind the scenes philosophy that
motivates the text and dictates its content and structure.

Both Hazel Barnes and Mary Sirridge exemplify the “concrete example”
approach. Barnes reads _L’invitée_ as an illustration of Jean-Paul Sartre’s _L’être et le néant:_
“As with all of de Beauvoir’s early fiction, the reader of _She Came to Stay_ feels that the
inspiration of the book was simply de Beauvoir’s decision to show how Sartre’s abstract
principles could be made to work out in ‘real life’” (122). Sirridge, on the other hand,
rejects this picture of Beauvoir as Sartre’s philosophical handmaiden but still claims that
_L’invitée_ is a concrete example of preconceived philosophical principles; it’s just that
these principles are Beauvoir’s own.² Take, for example, Sirridge’s explanation of the novel’s seemingly unnatural ending in which an ordinary protagonist commits the extraordinary act of murder:³

In order to understand what makes the murder of Xavière inevitable, then, it seems that we need to bring into sharper focus a second, “metaphysical” layer of narrative. The metaphysical framework . . . was the existentialist phenomenology . . . in her first published philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas.* (137-38, emphasis in the original)

While such pictures of the relationship between literature and philosophy allow for rich analyses of Beauvoir’s philosophical novels in relation to the field of philosophy, they also imply that to count as philosophy, a novel must lean heavily upon the crutch of an established philosophical system. In these pictures philosophy comes first and literature second. They see Beauvoir as coming to a philosophical conclusion – usually that another philosopher was right or wrong - and then imagining a literary world that best incarnates that conclusion. In these accounts, in other words, Beauvoir’s fiction does not act as a site of creative philosophical questioning but rather as a medium through which Beauvoir gives new form to her own or to someone else’s preexisting philosophical answer. The philosophical novel would thus be a calculated philosophical argument masquerading as a literary text, and the literariness of the novel would seem

² This interpretation of *L’invitée* is the inverse of later discussions that see Beauvoir’s later novels (*Les mandarins, La femme rompue*, etc.) as concrete examples of previously written essays. See, for example, Sally J. Scholz, “Sustained Praxis: The Challenge of Solidarity in *The Mandarins* and Beyond,” *The Contradictions of Freedom: Philosophical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir’s The Mandarins*, eds. Sally J. Scholz and Shannon M. Mussett (Albany: SUNY P, 2005).
³ Other critics have grappled with Beauvoir’s seemingly unnatural ending. See Moi, *Intellectual Woman* 115-44.
superfluous, like an unnecessary cover to what is really important, the philosophical theory.

As this picture of the philosophical novel clearly subordinates literature to philosophy, the primary purpose of this chapter and the next will be to mobilize Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory and fictional work in order to discover other ways in which a novel might lay claim to philosophy. In fact, Beauvoir’s unique aesthetic theory in “Littérature et métaphysique” points to a way around Kleppner’s contradiction, one that allows literature to make a more meaningful contribution to the field of philosophy while remaining true to itself as literature. Beauvoir’s theory posits a philosophical novel in which philosophy flows from and remains an integral part of the literary text and in which the text acts not as an argument but as something that Beauvoir calls a philosophical appeal.

Applying this theory to L’invitée in this chapter will reveal Beauvoir’s unique insights into one of philosophy’s most pressing problems: the problem of solipsism, or the belief that others do not exist outside of my mind. In this novel, the other appears to be unknowable in many respects, and yet the other still exists with astounding evidence, and one can sometimes know her partially. This ambiguous picture of how we live solipsistic problems does not appear in any single philosophical system, and yet in positing it, Beauvoir engages with currents of thought in the field about solipsism, from

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4 “Littérature et métaphysique” was originally published in the April 1946 edition of Les temps modernes and was republished in the collection of essays entitled L’existentialisme et la sagesse des nations (1948).
Descartes to Sartre. A study of the theory and the novel together thus provides a solid understanding not only of how a philosophical novel can do original philosophical work but also of the reasons why a philosopher like Beauvoir would choose to write – and actually prefers to write – a literary text in order to have her philosophical say.

1.2 “Littérature et métaphysique”: Literature as Lived Philosophy.

In “Littérature et métaphysique,” Beauvoir does not conclude that one must abandon philosophy in order to avoid didacticism and write an aesthetically pleasing novel. In fact, it is Beauvoir’s existentialist and phenomenological orientation that makes the writing of a successful philosophical novel not only possible but, in some cases, preferable. According to both the existential and the phenomenological approach, philosophical abstractions cannot stand on their own; they must emerge from the study of existence, of how human beings live their world. In Beauvoir’s philosophical writings, it is not only imperative that philosophical abstractions do not come first but that they form an integral whole with the concrete world that serves as their foundation.5 These tenets have a profound effect on Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory and

5 Toril Moi has argued that Beauvoir’s use of the phrase “standing out in relief against a background” (“s’enlever sur un fond”) in Le deuxième sexe creates a similar kind of ambiguity between the philosophical aspects of Beauvoir’s feminist masterwork and the lived experience (recounted in Beauvoir’s personal story and in the stories of other women) that grounds any universal philosophical statements about women’s general situation. Beauvoir thus creates an image of a sculptural relief in which the universal/philosophical stands out from the background of lived experience but is still indistinguishable and inseparable from it. Often in Le deuxième sexe this lived experience is personal and autobiographical as Moi notes, but Beauvoir also relies upon accounts of women’s lives from clinical studies, non-fiction, and fiction. The image of philosophy as standing out in relief from the imagined lived experience of a fictional character thus seems appropriate in this case. See Moi, What is a Woman? 190-96. The original quote to which Moi refers is the
point to a strict divergence between her assessment of the philosophical novel and
Kleppner’s.

Before explaining this divergence in greater detail, however, one must first
acknowledge that Beauvoir agrees with Kleppner on several key points. For example, in
Beauvoir’s estimation as well, too strong of a philosophical view risks diminishing a
novel’s literary worth:

[T]oute idée trop claire, toute thèse, toute doctrine qui tenterait de
s’élaborer à travers une fiction en détruirait aussitôt l’effet car elle en
dénoncerait l’auteur et la ferait, du même coup, apparaître comme fiction.
(Beauvoir ”Littérature et métaphysique” 74)

In other words, Beauvoir believes that thesis novels have little value and that the
incorporation of strict philosophical doctrine into a novel would push the work in that
direction.⁶

Like Kleppner, Beauvoir also dismisses the novel whose sole purpose is to
exemplify a preexisting philosophical system. She writes: “[À] quoi bon construire un
appareil fictif autour d’idées qu’on exprimerait avec plus d’économie et de clarté dans
un langage direct” (”Littérature et métaphysique” 72)? Even if the author conceives of
her own philosophical system and would then like to exemplify it in literary form, such

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⁶ It is important to note that I have chosen the word “doctrine” here, as Beauvoir does not dismiss the
integration of all philosophy into the novel, just doctrine or ideas that are too clear, strong, and
unambiguous. As I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4, in La force de l’âge Beauvoir goes so far as to condemn
her second novel, Le sang des autres, as a thesis novel which lacked the ambiguity and force of L’invitée.
a process would lead to a failure of the novel, for a preconceived philosophical agenda ruins the effect of the literary work as a whole:

[Si l’auteur] prévoit d’avance les conclusions auxquelles celui-ci [le lecteur] doit aboutir, s’il fait indiscrètement pression sur lui pour lui arracher son adhésion à des thèses préétablies, s’il ne lui accorde qu’une illusion de liberté, alors l’œuvre romanesque n’est qu’une mystification incongrue ; le roman ne revêt sa valeur et sa dignité que s’il constitue pour l’auteur comme pour le lecteur une découverte vivante.
("Littérature et métaphysique" 75)

While Beauvoir may make similar assumptions about the ways in which a novel cannot or should not lay claim to philosophy, she does not conclude, as Kleppner does, that the melding of the philosophical into the literary necessarily results in failure; rather, in “Littérature et métaphysique” the successful philosophical novelist creates a superior work, one that outshines non-philosophical novels, which do not give readers access to the universal. Such philosophical-literary texts outshine the vast majority of grand philosophical systems as well, for these systems pretend in their utter abstraction to deliver an essential truth cut off from and thus out of sync with the real world. In the philosophical novel, Beauvoir is looking for a hybrid genre that eliminates the shortcomings of each discipline, a genre that provides a bridge between the concrete and the abstract, between the particular and the universal. Or, perhaps more accurately, she is looking for a form of expression that would combine the abstract and the concrete in such a way that the two would meld into one another, that they would seem to be one, as they appear to us in everyday life. Beauvoir writes:
Beauvoir’s dissatisfaction with purely abstract philosophies and with non-philosophical novels thus leads to an aesthetic theory of the philosophical novel that undoes traditional understandings of how a novel lays claim to philosophy. Instead of asserting that philosophy underlies or motivates the creation of the literary world, Beauvoir sees literature and the literary world as the concrete foundation for philosophical abstractions and their claims to the universal. Philosophy, in other words, is created with and through the creation of a believable literary universe; it emerges out of that world and remains dependent upon it rather than serving as its hidden source.

As Eleanore Holveck aptly puts it:

In short, the metaphysical novelist recreates imaginatively, in its written articulation, the singular, lived metaphysical situation which grounds the abstract philosophical system. Before we can think the world, that world must be immediately experienced, disclosed. Since reality is revealed in relation to action and feeling as well as to thinking, the novel expresses a full concrete truth about the world. (17-18)

Holveck sees Beauvoir’s turn to the concrete as evidence that Beauvoir would like to test the abstract claims of philosophy in fiction, which is the writer’s best approximation of the real world. She writes:

*L’invitée* is a clear example of Beauvoir’s use of fiction to question the evidence for a philosophical system. In the novel Pierre comments to
Françoise that she is the only person he knows capable of shedding tears on discovering that others exist; it surprises him that she is so affected by a metaphysical problem. Françoise replies, “[t]he whole meaning of my life is at stake”; a theoretical idea “can be tested” in her own experience or “it has no value.” (67)

In other words, Holveck believes that Beauvoir would like to turn from a concrete example way of picturing the relationship between literature and philosophy to one in which concrete literary text tests philosophy’s abstract ideas.8

A closer look at the original French version of *L’invitée*, however, suggests an even more radical revision of ideas about what the philosophical novel is and what it can do. While Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse’s translation does indicate that Françoise would like to test philosophical viewpoints in her lived experience, the original French does not necessarily point to such a conclusion: “[P]our moi,” Françoise says, “une idée... ça s’éprouve, ou si ça reste théorique, ça ne compte pas” (*L’invitée* 376, emphasis added). Although “s’éprouver” could mean “to be tested,” it could also mean “to be lived, felt, or experienced.” Testing philosophical ideas, it seems, is not necessarily important to what Beauvoir is trying to say about philosophy and lived experience. In fact, given the contextual clues, the alternative translation of “s’éprouver” as “to be

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7 Within this citation Holveck is quoting *She Came to Stay*, the English translation of *L’invitée*.
8 This would seem to indicate a contradiction in Beauvoir’s theory, for in the test in the concrete picture philosophy would remain distinct from literature and in many ways would still predetermine the shape of the literary universe. For example, if, as Holveck claims, Beauvoir’s goal truly were to incarnate a Kantian or a Hegelian position within her characters, then she would have to mold her characters to fit those positions. If her goal truly were to disprove those positions, then she would have to adjust her plot in order to cast them in an unfavorable light. The philosophy would also still be Kant’s or Hegel’s philosophy under a literary cover with the difference that these philosophical viewpoints would fail to hold in the fictional world.
lived, felt, or experienced” fits the passage much more closely than Moyse and Senhouse’s (and through them Holveck’s) “test.” After all, this line is a response to Pierre, who asks how Françoise could be “touchée d’une manière si concrète par une situation métaphysique” (L’invitée 375). As if to reject the idea that she had discovered a metaphysical concept separate from her physical world, Françoise responds: “Mais c’est du concret... tout le sens de ma vie se trouve mis en jeu” (L’invitée 375). This implies that philosophical viewpoints come out of or from the concrete, that they are made of the stuff of the concrete and are in some way inseparable from it, not that they are compared to or tried out upon the concrete. Pierre then reinforces such an interpretation of Françoise’s statement: “C’est quand même exceptionnel ce pouvoir que tu as de vivre une idée corps et âme” (L’invitée 376, emphasis added).

The context of this statement, therefore, suggests a translation of “s’éprouver” as “feeling” or “living,” and this new translation reinforces Beauvoir’s theory in “Littérature et métaphysique.” Life does not incarnate philosophy in Beauvoir’s novels, life is philosophy; there is no separation between the two, or, as Beauvoir wrote in “L’existentialisme et la sagesse des nations”: “En vérité, il n’y a pas de divorce entre philosophie et vie” (Sagesse des nations 9). If literature is an imaginative incarnation of life, the author does not create it in order to test philosophical theories as in a laboratory but rather to create a philosophical appeal within the imagined experience. Philosophy does not come first; it does not motivate the text but rather flows from and remains a
part of it, and the goal for Beauvoir is to express a *lived* philosophy, to express how we as individual human beings can live philosophy.

1.3 Literature and Phenomenology: Starting with Imagined Lived Experience in order to Philosophize about Solipsism.

This picture of philosophical literature as lived philosophy has led several critics to situate Beauvoir’s choice to write philosophical novels within the framework of her overall affinity for phenomenology, or a philosophical approach that concerns itself with “the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski 2). In phenomenology, one starts with what one sees in the world and philosophizes from there, anchoring philosophy to particular incidents in everyday life. This leads to a proliferation of anecdotes within the phenomenological text, anecdotes which are in fact tiny fictions describing, in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *L'être et le néant* for example, a man waiting for a friend in a café or a man standing on the edge of a cliff. These little fictions ground the abstract philosophical

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arguments of the phenomenological text. In Sartre’s case, the man waiting for a friend in a café discovers truths about the origins of nothingness when his friend fails to appear (L’être et le néant 43-45), and the man standing on the edge of the cliff discovers the anguish (angoisse) inherent in his freedom when he realizes that he could, at any moment, decide to throw himself from the cliff (L’être et le néant 67).

An understanding of the similar methods espoused by phenomenology and philosophical literature thus provides a stronger sense of how philosophical novels could lay claim to the philosophical tradition. For the critics who have seen this connection, literature counts as an imagined lived experience (erlebnis) which can then ground an entire philosophical system. In other words, readers of the philosophical novel should treat the description of lived experience not as a decoration hiding a philosophical idea but as the site of philosophy itself.

This is precisely the kind of reading that Kate and Edward Fullbrook have done in Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth Century Legend in which they assert that L’invitée simply is an original philosophical text. In fact, by looking to the life world of Beauvoir’s characters first rather than to some abstract philosophical treatise, they have made a groundbreaking discovery in their reading of

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10 Of the critics who have made the connection between Beauvoir’s fiction and her phenomenological method (see footnote 9 in this chapter for the complete list), the following equate fiction with a kind of erlebnis:

11 Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty does a similar reading of L’invitée in which he begins with the lived experience of Beauvoir’s characters in order to draw philosophical conclusions. Merleau-Ponty’s reading is especially interesting because he inserts his own phenomenological “I” into his analysis, thus writing a sort of phenomenological literary criticism. See Merleau-Ponty, “Roman et métaphysique.”
L’invitée: namely, the discovery of Beauvoir’s engagement with the problem of solipsism. A closer look both at the Fullbrooks’ analysis and at the novel itself will thus provide a better idea of how a method similar to the one used in phenomenology could allow the philosophical novel to make original arguments about philosophy’s problems and in this case about the problem of solipsism.

According to the Fullbrooks, Beauvoir engages these problems immediately, in the opening scene of L’invitée. This scene, the Fullbrooks argue, points to a potential “gap between appearance and reality” (107), which Plato opened up centuries ago and which philosophers have been struggling to close ever since. Citing Bertrand Russell, they show why philosophers have seen this gap to be problematic. Russell writes:

Thus what we directly see and feel is merely “appearance,” which we believe to be a sign of some “reality” behind. But if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all? And if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like? (qtd. in Remaking 107)

In other words, for philosophers after Plato, the perceived gap between appearance and reality opens up the possibility for the kind of skeptical doubt that leads to solipsism. If

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12 For another excellent article on Beauvoir and solipsism, see Margaret A. Simons, "Bergson’s Influence on Beauvoir’s Philosophical Methodology," The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).

13 For articles that expand on the findings of their book by offering similar philosophical-literary analyses of She came to stay, see Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, "Sartre’s Secret Key," Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir, ed. Margaret A. Simons, Re-Reading the Canon (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995); , Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook, "The Absence of Beauvoir," Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre, ed. Julien S. Murphy, Re-Reading the Canon (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999); , Fullbrook and Fullbrook, "Clinic and Cave."; and , Edward Fullbrook, "She Came to Stay and Being and Nothingness," The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006), published after Kate Fullbrook’s death.
there is an unbridgeable gap between what I think I see and what is truly there, then my mental perceptions could be completely different from what is around me. I only need to take one more logical step to the belief that only I exist with certainty and that I cannot prove the existence of an external world.

As in most phenomenological accounts, nothing extraordinary happens in this scene, at least not on first glance. It begins with Françoise working late at night in a theater with her colleague, Gerbert. At a certain point, Françoise leaves the room, walks through the corridors, past the stage on which nothing happens, and brings back some whiskey for her and Gerbert to drink. The way that Françoise thinks of these ordinary events, however, reveals a striking philosophical insight; namely that “the[. . .] existence [of things] depends on the presence of a human consciousness” (K. Fullbrook and E. Fullbrook Remaking 104). Such an insight becomes apparent in passages from L’invitée like the following:

Quand elle n’était pas là. . . tout ça n’existait pour personne, ça n’existait pas du tout. Et maintenant elle était là, le rouge du tapis perçait l’obscurité comme une veilleuse timide. Elle avait ce pouvoir : sa présence arrachait les choses à leur inconscience, elle leur donnait leur couleur, leur odeur... . . [C]’était comme une mission qui lui avait été confiée, il fallait la faire exister, cette salle déserte et pleine de nuit. Le rideau de fer était baissé, les murs sentaient la peinture fraîche ; les fauteuils de peluche rouge s’alignaient, inertes, en attente. Tout à l’heure ils n’attendaient rien. Et maintenant elle était là et ils tendaient leurs bras. Ils regardaient la scène masquée par le rideau de fer, ils appelaient Pierre, et les lumières de la rampe et une foule recueillie. Il aurait fallu rester là toujours, pour perpétuer cette solitude et cette attente ; mais il aurait fallu être aussi ailleurs... . . : il aurait fallu être partout à la fois... . . Elle était seule à dégager le sens de ces lieux abandonnés, de ces objets en sommeil
; elle était là et ils lui appartenaient. Le monde lui appartenait. (Beauvoir
L’invitée 12)

According to the Fullbrooks, Beauvoir’s contribution to philosophy here is to show that appearances, while remaining dependent upon Françoise’s consciousness, “nevertheless do refer to a reality that exists independently of consciousness” (Remaking 104). In walking through the theater, Françoise sees not only how one individual thing appears to her, but she also intuits a “series of appearances” (Remaking 104, emphasis in the original) to which each appearance belongs, and it is “the unifying principle” of this series that “constitutes the independent reality or existence of the theater” (Remaking 104). The things that Françoise does not or cannot see constitute this series just as much as what she does see; it is not only the stage or the red carpet, but also the adjacent rooms that lie hidden behind the theater doors and the sense – drawn from her desire to be everywhere - that she could see the theater from an infinite number of perspectives, at different times of day and in different light. The Fullbrooks conclude: “From these characteristics of the series it follows that consciousness can never experience all the appearances of an object and that therefore the object’s being is not reducible to consciousness of it” (Remaking 105).

Not only does Beauvoir solve the problem of solipsism in relation to things, the Fullbrooks contend, she also goes on to solve the problem of solipsism when it comes to other human beings by showing that others do exist outside of her perception of them.
Beauvoir accomplishes this feat in one conversation between Françoise and Gerbert, just after Françoise returns to their office with the whiskey. Françoise says to Gerbert:

On ne peut pas réaliser que les autres gens sont des consciences qui se sentent du dedans comme on se sent soi-même... Quand on entrevoit ça, je trouve que c’est terrifiant : on a l’impression de ne plus être qu’une image dans la tête de quelqu’un d’autre. Mais ça n’arrive presque jamais, et jamais tout à fait. (Beauvoir *L’invitée* 18)

From this, the Fullbrooks conclude: “It is this experiencing of oneself as another’s object that Beauvoir offers as proof of the consciousness of others” (*Remaking* 110, emphasis in the original).

Although Beauvoir does not, as a phenomenologist would, offer explicit arguments about solipsism, one could still claim a definite parallel between the philosophical-literary text as the Fullbrooks understand it and phenomenology. The phenomenologist begins with an account of lived experience and makes philosophical arguments based on that experience. The author of the philosophical novel also gives an account of lived experience but then makes her argument through literary technique. The arguments are there, structurally ingrained into the inner workings of the text, and one must have the patience and the literary and philosophical acuity to find them.

### 1.4 The Reliance of Philosophy on the Aesthetic: Another Look at the Opening of *L’invitée*

According to the Fullbrooks, literature as imagined lived experience offers unique solutions to philosophy’s problems; namely, the gap between appearance and reality and the ensuing consequence of solipsism. Implied in their approach is the idea
that it is imperative to read literary texts closely, to delve into their complexity as a literary theorist would in order to discover the novel’s philosophical contributions. One cannot, for example, discover the problem of solipsism in *L’invitée* without offering a subtle reading of the opening scene. What the Fullbrooks do not highlight in their analysis is how much their philosophical conclusions depend upon the *literariness* of the novel, upon Beauvoir’s aesthetic choices.¹⁴

Take, for example, the Fullbrooks’ first assertion that Françoise’s philosophical stance proves the existence of objects outside of her mind. It is, in fact, the language and imagery of the scene – aspects of a text that philosophers do not usually discuss - that indicate this stance. Initially, Beauvoir presents Françoise’s world as a series of stark extremes. Opposed to absence and silence, one finds presence and action, which in turn cultivates a stark contrast between life and death, people and things, emptiness and plenitude; the two extremes of this contrast inhabit two very different spaces, with life hovering around Françoise in her office and death lurking outside in the empty theatre: “Françoise regarda les murs de son petit bureau, l’air rose rayonnait de chaleur et de lumière humaine. Dehors, c’était le théâtre inhumain et noir, avec ses couloirs déserts, autour d’une grande coque creuse” (*L’invitée* 11-12). Perhaps saying that life hovers around Françoise does not quite capture what happens in this scene. It is almost as if

¹⁴ This recalls Nussbaum’s argument from the introduction in which she affirms the importance of the literary form in building knowledge. See pp. 22-25.
life emanates from her so that, in spite of the presence of Gerbert, Françoise acts as the locus of presence and action, life and subjectivity.

At some point, however, Beauvoir’s beautifully arranged contrasts begin to break down. Because Françoise acts as the locus of subjectivity and consciousness in the text, it is also through her that the dichotomies of the scene shift or dissolve. Through her, life flows into death, presence into absence, plenitude into emptiness, for-itself into in-itself. Thus when she leaves the theatre, it is not only to get whisky, but also to illuminate the tomblike corridors with life. Red, dark, solitude, auditorium: Françoise perceives all of these concepts as flowing from her, as coming into focus, arising out of darkness in the soft light (“la veilleuse”) of her consciousness. Somewhere in this perception, the barrier between self and thing, self and world breaks down, so that Françoise literally gives life to the theatre in which she works: “Et je suis là, mon cœur bat. Cette nuit, le théâtre a un cœur qui bat” (L’invitée 11). Through Françoise, the theater not only has a human heart, but it has a human body (“[les chaises] tendaient leurs bras”), it has human senses (“Ils regardaient la scène masquée par le rideau de fer”), and it has human desires (les fauteuils de peluche rouge s’alignaient, inertes, en attente... .[I]ls appelaient Pierre).

Already Beauvoir presents us with a scene that, philosophically speaking, is highly charged, but at the same time this scene defies our attempts to encase it in a pre-established philosophical system. Through the careful construction of a literary
universe, she is presenting us with a new philosophical way of viewing life. All the
while, this scene works as a beautiful piece of literature, immersing us in a believable
world and in an aesthetically gripping moment. In fact, we would have a hard time
separating Beauvoir’s philosophical moment from her personal, literary style, from her
imagery and her word choice. This is what Beauvoir meant when she said that “la
disctintion entre le fond et la forme est perimée. . . les deux sont inséparables” (“Que
peut la littérature?” 84). She continues: “On ne peut pas séparer la manière de raconter
et ce qui est raconté, parce que la manière de raconter c’est le rythme même de la
recherche, c’est la manière de la définir, c’est la manière de la vivre” (“Que peut la
littérature?” 85). This scene, therefore, presents a perfect example of the ways in which
fiction can work as philosophy without losing its literary identity in the process. In fact,
in Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory, style and imagery are not mere decorations but rather an
integral part of the novel’s lived philosophy.

1.5 On Literature as Philosophical Argument

Through readings like the Fullbrooks’, literature is clearly able to make original
contributions to philosophical debates about solipsism through a methodology similar
to the one found in phenomenology, and this, in turn, implies that philosophers would
have incentive to read philosophical novels. Several problems, however, still remain

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15 Que peut la littérature? was originally a forum in which proponents of committed literature debated
aesthetic theory with proponents of the newly ascendant nouveau roman. The presentations at this forum
were later published in a volume under the same name.
both from a literary and a philosophical standpoint. According to the Fullbrooks,
*L’invitée* presents strong arguments about traditional philosophical problems, and yet, as
Kleppner would remind them, strong arguments should leave the novel open to attack
by literary theorists for a lack of ambiguity. From a philosophical perspective, the
Fullbrooks’ picture of Beauvoir’s philosophical method presents her as conveying ideas
in fiction “qu’on exprimerait avec plus d’économie et de clarté dans un langage direct”
(Beauvoir “Littérature et métaphysique” 72). The Fullbrooks do not indicate why a
philosopher like Beauvoir would choose to write a novel rather than a system like *L’être
et le néant*, which, as an existential and phenomenological text, should ground its
abstractions in observations of the world. In other words, it still seems there is work to
be done if one wants to justify the philosophical novel as a way of writing literature and
doing philosophy.

This second point – that Beauvoir could just as easily have written a
philosophical text that takes the concrete into account - proves particularly troublesome
for the Fullbrooks’ work. According to the Fullbrooks, Beauvoir’s insights about
solipsism do indeed found a major philosophical system: namely that of Sartre’s *L’être et
le néant*. In their book, the Fullbrooks want to correct a dominant yet sexist trend in
existentialist studies which painted Beauvoir as, in Toril Moi’s words, “nothing but an
empty receptacle for the man’s [Sartre’s] thoughts” (*Intellectual Woman* 4). Turning to
Beauvoir and Sartre’s diaries and letters, the Fullbrooks show that Beauvoir had finished
writing the bulk of *L’invitée* before Sartre had even started *L’être et le néant*. Given the similarities between the two works, the Fullbrooks conclude that it was Beauvoir, and not Sartre, who invented the philosophical ideas that the two shared while Sartre merely transcribed these ideas into another medium and claimed them as his own:

>[She Came to Stay], in fact, articulates a philosophical system that in its basic structure differs almost not at all from the one found in *Being and Nothingness*. Through skilful orchestration of Socratic dialogues, imagery, dramatizations and third-person narration focused on characters’ consciousnesses, Beauvoir had already produced a full statement of “Sartrean” existentialism by 1940. (K. Fullbrook and E. Fullbrook *Remaking* 101-02)

This means that the opening of *L’être et le néant* was, in the Fullbrooks’ opinion, nothing but a “long-winded rewording of Beauvoir’s argument” (*Remaking* 106) on appearances and that Sartre’s famous concept of the Look was in fact Beauvoir’s, lifted from sections of the novel like the opening dialogue with Gerbert (*Remaking* 111).16 Certainly literary form has helped to build the philosophical vision of *L’invitée*, but if these same ideas can be transcribed into *L’être et le néant*, then literature, at least in this case, has nothing to offer to philosophy that philosophy alone could not provide.

Both of these problems may be resolved, however, through a reconsideration of the Fullbrooks’ claim that Beauvoir’s novel is making a philosophical *argument* against

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16 This depiction of the Beauvoir-Sartre relationship has provoked controversy. Toril Moi, for example, argues that it ends up “casting Sartre as the empty receptacle for Beauvoir’s thoughts” when “[w]hat we usually call influence in literary history or in the history of philosophy is never that simple” Moi, *Intellectual Woman* 4. For more on this argument, see Moi, *Intellectual Woman* 4 and 164-67. See also Nancy Bauer, “Must We Read Simone de Beauvoir?,” *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Emily R. Grosholz (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004) 124-25.
solipsism, one that can then be found, perfectly transcribed, into Sartre’s master opus. In fact, the position on solipsism in *L’invitée* is much more ambiguous than the Fullbrooks’ reading of the first scene would lead one to believe, and this level of ambiguity is absent from Sartre’s treatment of solipsism in *L’être et le néant*. Hence, Beauvoir’s novel *does* maintain the level of ambiguity required by literary standards, and, as a closer reading of the text shows, it is precisely this ambiguity that constitutes the philosophical strength of Beauvoir’s novel.

Showing how a particular character lives philosophical problems means presenting readers with an ambiguous truth that is elided in the traditional philosophical text’s quest to present a clear and cohesive argument. In the case of *L’invitée*, such an ambiguous truth reveals itself through competing passages which seem to contradict one another. If Beauvoir has solved the problem of solipsism at the outset of her novel, for example, she still, strangely enough, has Françoise continue to wrestle with the kinds of epistemological questions that ground the traditional argument for solipsism. Furthermore, Beauvoir presents these as legitimate and difficult struggles for her protagonist, with whom she invites the reader to identify.

Take, for example, a scene in which Pierre tells Françoise he is interested in hearing about a conversation she had earlier in the day:

> Elle lui jeta un regard défiant ; naguère, elle aurait pensé tout rondement “ça l’intéresse” et elle aurait vite tout raconté ; quand ils s’adressaient à elle, les mots, les sourires de Pierre, c’était Pierre lui-même ; soudain, ils lui apparaissaient comme des signes ambigus ; Pierre les avait
délibérément produits ; il était caché derrière eux, on pouvait affirmer seulement : “il dit que ça l’intéresse” et rien de plus. (L’invitée 160)

Here we have a perfect skeptical picture built around the unreliability of language. The logic is simple: Pierre could be lying, or he could be unthinkingly following a social formality, or any number of things, and this means that his words could express something about him that is not actually true. This possibility for deception opens the way for Françoise’s skeptical demons. Under the pressure of her doubt, Pierre’s words degenerate into inscrutable signs and Pierre into an unknowable entity who hides behind those signs, just out of reach. In more general terms, Françoise’s loss of faith in the power of language causes an epistemological crisis in which she doubts her ability to know others as they truly are. In this moment, the gap between appearance and reality looms large indeed, and the problem of solipsism lies just around the corner. All Françoise must do is jump from the doubt that she can know anything about the other to the affirmation that the only reality is her perception of others, that others do not really exist.

This kind of ambiguity surrounding the question of solipsism emerges even within readings of individual scenes. For example, even in the first scene – the scene that was supposed to definitively do away with Cartesian doubt - we have an inkling of what Margaret Simons calls Françoise’s “solipsism” for Françoise “se voit d’abord comme conscience libre et désincarnée, niant l’existence d’autres consciences” (Simons “Du solipsisme” 216). One could not better describe the Françoise we meet in the
theater. Convinced that she is the sole consciousness in the world, Françoise feels that she gives the theater and everything beyond it structure and meaning; without her, the world simply fades to black, as if it does not even exist. It does not even seem to occur to her that others could illuminate its hallways or its stage as she has done. At this point in her life, Françoise has an absolute and unquestioned confidence in her unique ability to organize the world ("le monde lui appartenait"). This confidence in turn endows her with desires to be Godlike ("il aurait fallu être partout à la fois"), with a mistaken sense that she is the absolute, the only arbiter of truth and meaning, and that she should be omnipresent to endow the entire world with necessity and not just this small corner of it.

We can also, however, see the differences between Françoise and a typical Cartesian solipsist who claims that others do not exist at all. In her analysis of Françoise, Simons is the first to point out that Françoise acts in ways that a hard and true solipsist would not. For example, she attempts to meld first with Pierre and then with Xavière in completely transparent, perfectly unified relationships. Both attempts fail miserably, but they indicate a belief that Pierre and Xavière exist, that they are not figments of Françoise’s imagination.

These contradictory tendencies in Françoise – on the one hand to believe that others exist and on the other to fall into classic skeptical traps that could lead to solipsism – occur even in the moment when Françoise finally does discover with absolute certainty that Xavière exists. This happens when Xavière burns herself with a
cigarette, which makes Françoise feel as if Xavière “était soudain devenue l’unique réalité souveraine et Françoise n’avait plus que la pâle consistance d’une image” (L’invitée 364). When Françoise later discusses the incident with Pierre, she uses terms very similar to those that she used in the first scene: “C’est parce que j’ai découvert qu’elle avait une conscience comme la mienne ; est-ce que ça t’est déjà arrivé de sentir comme du dedans la conscience d’autrui” (L’invitée 369)? The Fullbrooks’ conclusion, that feeling oneself to be nothing but a reflection in someone else’s mind leads to proof of their existence, seems absolutely justified in this case.

Certain aspects of L’invitée, however, complicate their assertion. From the beginning, Françoise’s language sets up a distinction between the inside (consciousness) and the outside (body). In the first scene, for example, Françoise frames her question about other consciousnesses around how she can get past the other’s bodily exterior to access what the other feels or thinks on the inside. As we would expect, when Françoise comes to the terrifying conclusion that Xavière exists, Beauvoir’s imagery indicates a softening of this distinction. In pressing the cigarette to her flesh, in exposing what lies underneath the skin, Xavière literally reveals an inside that is normally hidden, and figuratively, she breaks the body’s barrier and infuses this act with her desire, revealing a pleasure all her own. This desire and pleasure would not exist to the true solipsist, but Françoise can see it as real:

Derrière ce rictus maniaque, un danger menaçait, plus définitif que tous ceux qu’elle avait jamais imaginés. Quelque chose était là, qui s’ètreignait
soi-même avec avidité, qui existait pour soi-même avec certitude ; on ne pouvait pas s’en approcher même en pensée, au moment où elle touchait au but, la pensée se dissolvait ; ce n’était aucun objet saisissable, c’était un incessant jaillissement et une fuite incessante, transparente pour soi seule et à jamais impénétrable. On ne pourrait que tourner en rond tout autour dans une exclusion éternelle. (L’invitée 354)

And yet, if Beauvoir softens this distinction, she does not completely eradicate it, and skeptical problems—problems of knowing the other as she truly is or being able to connect with her in a significant way—do not go away but rather become more acute. If Françoise allows these kinds of doubts to take too much hold, they could lead her back to full-blown solipsism. When Xavière burns her flesh, there is something in that pleasure that Françoise cannot share, that “aucun mot, aucune image ne pouvait cerner” (L’invitée 364), that evades her attempts to understand or grasp it. The meaning of this pleasure and its exact nature still hide behind Xavière’s body and face, which act as a visible barrier to the consciousness lurking beneath: “[Françoise] considérerait avec stupeur ce corps qui se laissait toucher, et ce beau visage visible derrière lequel se dérobait une présence scandaleuse” (L’invitée 364). The inside/outside distinction thus lives on, even if the inside exists with certainty, and this distinction separates Françoise and Xavière in a radical way.

And so the discovery of other consciousnesses that are essential like her own ironically leads Françoise to feel more isolated than when she mostly felt herself to be the unique essential consciousness in the world. It also alienates her from the other, makes the other more mysterious to her: “[E]n face de Françoise, et cependant sans elle, quelque
chose existait comme une condamnation sans recours: libre, absolue, irréductible, une conscience étrangère se dressait” (L’invitée 363-64, emphasis added). Once again, Françoise does not deny that others exist and so is not a hard and true solipsist, but like solipsists, she feels herself to be radically alone, and she has a sense of the other as unreachable or unknowable that could undo the foundations of her belief in the other’s reality. There are thus many contradictory threads surrounding the question of solipsism in L’invitée, and all these contradictions make for a jumbled argument indeed. In the end, there seems to be no definitive passage that once and for all condemns or supports solipsism. And yet, if Beauvoir has not made an argument that solves the problem of solipsism in L’invitée, can we still see her as contributing to the philosophical tradition?

After presenting the complexity of Françoise’s character, Simons still seems to think that Françoise warrants the label of solipsist, but she sees Beauvoir’s protagonist as “une solipsiste atypique” (Simons “Du solipsisme” 216). As Simons suggests, Françoise may not be the kind of solipsist that Descartes was when he called the existence of others into question, but she still remains a solipsist in some way. She still has skeptical doubts about the nature of other consciousnesses, about their similarity to her own, and even if she eventually does get beyond this doubt, she does not get beyond a skeptical vision of the others in her world, and this skepticism risks degenerating into solipsism.
If we think of Françoise in this way, as an atypical solipsist, we can start to see Beauvoir’s appropriation of the problem of solipsism in *L’invitée* as a very original one. What Beauvoir gives us is not an argument but rather an account of our philosophical reality. When we read something like Descartes’s *Méditations*, we feel the force of his argument. No, we say to ourselves, we cannot know the other. Yes, we say to ourselves, something in the other’s existence is more dubious than our own. And yet afterwards we do not begin treating others as if they were automata or worse as if they do not exist. In her nuanced portrait of Françoise, Beauvoir shows us why this is. In Beauvoir’s novel, we can know that the other exists while still feeling radically alone and still feeling that something in the other necessarily escapes us, is foreign to us, and thus is unknowable. In her novel, Beauvoir has not given us warmed-over Descartes but instead has given us a rethinking and a repositioning of the problem of solipsism. In so doing, she does not completely refute her predecessors – in many instances she shows their problems as looming large in the life of her character – but rather appropriates their work and creates something entirely Beauvoirian with it. In this way we can see Beauvoir’s novels as Nancy Bauer sees her discursive works, “not [as] a polemical retheorizing of old problems but instead [as] a constructive recounting…of earlier philosophers’ most compelling intuitions” (Bauer *Philosophy and Feminism* 135).
1.6 “Un mode de communication irréductible à toute autre”: Ambiguity and the Appeal in “Littérature et métaphysique.”

The reason Amy Kleppner concluded that existentialists had presented themselves with a Herculean task in wanting to write a philosophical novel is because Kleppner started with a very specific conception of philosophy as a strong and clear argument. Accepting that Beauvoir’s L’invitée contributes to the field of philosophy, saying that it counts as philosophy, seems therefore to require a radical rethinking of what philosophy is and what it does or at least of how one can engage with philosophy.

If we look closely at “Littérature et métaphysique,” we will see that Beauvoir has done that radical rethinking already. The philosophical novel must be, in Beauvoir’s terms, an appeal to the reader’s freedom, an appeal that the reader then takes up and answers:17

En vérité, c’est bien souvent le lecteur qui refuse de participer sincèrement à l’expérience dans laquelle l’auteur tente de l’entraîner…

[A]vant même d’ouvrir le livre, il lui suppose des clés et, au lieu de se laisser prendre par l’histoire, sans cesse il cherche à la traduire ; ce monde imaginaire qu’il devrait vivifier, il le tue et se plaint qu’on lui ait livré un cadavre… M. Blanchot dit très profondément, à propos de Kafka, qu’en le lisant on comprend toujours trop ou trop peu. Je crois que cette remarque peut s’appliquer à tout roman métaphysique en général ; mais cette hésitation, cette part d’aventure, le lecteur ne doit pas essayer de l’éluder ; qu’il n’oublie pas que sa collaboration est nécessaire puisque le propre du roman est précisément de faire appel à sa liberté. (“Littérature et métaphysique” 83-84)

17 Jean-Paul Sartre also understands literature as an appeal to the reader’s freedom. See Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (Paris: Gallimard, 1948) 48-72. Although he does not use the term “appeal” often in Que peut la littérature?, one can see that the same conception of literature grounds this essay as well (cf Jean-Paul Sartre, “Que peut la littérature?,” Que peut la littérature?, ed. Yves Buin (Union générale d’éditions, 1965), vol., 119-27.).
And yet, in this quotation, it is unclear what Beauvoir means when she says that “le propre du roman est précisément de faire appel à sa liberté.” Understanding Beauvoir’s use of the word appeal here proves to be the key to understanding how she claims the novel as unique, as “un mode de communication irréductible à tout autre” (“Littérature et métaphysique” 72).

In Beauvoir’s oeuvre, “appealing to the freedom of the other” refers to a very specific philosophical concept, one that she created in much of her early writing, such as Pyrrhus and Cinéas and Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté. As in “Littérature et métaphysique,” the appeal in Pyrrhus and Cinéas has to do with language, with communication: “le langage est un appel à la liberté de l’autre puisque le signe n’est signe que par une conscience qui le ressaisit” (Pyrrhus 298). In both works, Beauvoir posits language as a collaboration between two subjects: one puts language out into the world, stakes her subjectivity in what she says, and invites the other to take that language up and freely interpret it.

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18 See Simone de Beauvoir, Pyrrhus et Cinéas (Paris: Gallimard, 1944) 298 and 305-06 and , Simone de Beauvoir, Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 86 and 93.

19 Although she does not emphasize it as much as in her earlier work, the concept also appears in Le deuxième sexe where Beauvoir describes female desire as an appeal. See Eva Gothlin, "Beauvoir and Sartre on Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity," The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006). The appeal of Beauvoir’s earlier work is not necessarily unconnected to the appeal of Le deuxième sexe; if Beauvoir reformulates the appeal as desire, it is perhaps to signal a conception of desire as a form of communication between two consciousnesses. Or, according to Gothlin’s interpretation, this transition in the context of the appeal could signal “[a] metaphorical connection... between intersubjectivity and femininity because feminine desire is named an ‘appeal to’ the other, and comprises the ambiguity of the human condition” Gothlin, "Appeal, Desire," 139.
And yet, if this is our definition of the appeal, Beauvoir’s theory risks appearing empty to us. After all, if any form of language constitutes an appeal and any response to that appeal is considered free, then no way of writing or responding would be privileged over another. In Pyrrhus et Cinéas, for example, even a master appeals to the freedom of his slave in speaking to him (Beauvoir Pyrrhus)(297-98). So how can appealing to the reader’s freedom be “le propre du roman”? Can a philosophical essay not appeal to its reader’s freedom just as well as a novel?

Our problem, it seems, arises from the fact that in her work, Beauvoir oscillates between two different conceptions of freedom, sometimes without even indicating that she is doing so. The first is a metaphysical conception of freedom according to which we freely choose how we live any situation, no matter how restrictive. This voluntaristic notion saturates Sartre’s early philosophy and allows him to argue in L’être et le néant that even a victim of torture is free because he can choose not to give in to the pain (L’être et le néant 443). As many critics have pointed out, however, Beauvoir also introduces the idea of concrete freedom in order to talk about oppression, especially when she turns to her analysis of women in Le deuxième sexe. In order to be free in this

20 Sartre would later reassert this metaphysical freedom in the face of torture in his play Mort sans sépulture. See Jean-Paul Sartre, “Morts sans sépulture,” La P... respectueuse suivi de Mort sans sépulture (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

sense, one must have the concrete means to express oneself as transcendence. Michèle Le Dœuff writes: “La privation de moyens concrets, comme obstacle radical à l’affirmation de soi comme sujet, voilà une idée assez étrangère à l’optique de L’être et le néant” (Étude I: 115). And in fact, Beauvoir presented this point as one which put her at odds with Sartre:

Je soutenais que, du point de vue de la liberté, telle que Sartre la définissait... les situations ne sont pas équivalentes : quel dépassement est possible à la femme enfermée dans un harem ? Même cette clausturation, il y a différentes manières de la vivre, me disait Sartre. Je m’obstinais longtemps et je ne cédaï que du bout de lèvres. Au fond, j’avais raison.” (Force de l’âge 498-99)

Although all language constitutes an appeal, some ways of writing create a concrete situation which invites a free response while others try to dictate or guide that response (which still, nevertheless, remains free in the metaphysical sense). Thus Beauvoir is able to write:

Le théoricien veut nous contraindre d’adhérer aux idées que lui a suggérées la chose, l’événement. Beaucoup d’esprits répugnent à cette docilité intellectuelle. Ils veulent garder la liberté de leur pensée ; il leur plait, au contraire, qu’une fiction imite l’opacité, l’ambiguïté, l’impartialité de la vie. ("Littérature et métaphysique" 73)


22 I say Beauvoir “is able to write” this here, but I do not believe an early Sartre could do the same without contradicting himself. In Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 169-308., he does claim that in some eras literature constitutes more of an appeal to the reader’s freedom than in others, but in doing so, he strays from L’être et le néant’s radical freedom to a more Beauvoirian understanding in which concrete factors do matter. In fact, the very concept of the appeal, which implies reciprocity, does not fit in the philosophical system of L’être et le néant, which does not allow for reciprocity. If Sartre talks of an appeal, it is because he is working toward a different understanding of how people relate to one another.
Beauvoir’s theory thus implies that there was a reason why it was difficult to make
*L’invitée* into an argument about solipsism. Beauvoir asserts that good fiction is *not* an
argument; it does not tell people *what to think*, about philosophy or anything else.
Instead, good fiction gives its reader a vision of the world as someone else sees it, and
the novelist presents this vision as colored by philosophy. Good fiction shows us how
people live philosophy in all its ambiguity. Because this raw vision invites a myriad of
interpretations rather than telling the reader which one to see, it mobilizes the reader’s
freedom in a way that a brilliant philosophical argument does not. The novel’s
ambiguity, which makes it a good novel in a literary sense, also turns out to be its
philosophical advantage in Beauvoir’s eyes.

Beauvoir’s advice in “Littérature et métaphysique” is for critics to treat the
philosophical novel as *having a particular capacity* to appeal to the reader’s freedom. If
we respond to the novel as if it were a traditional philosophical treatise, we will be
ignoring that particular capacity. In order to appreciate the value of the philosophical
novel, we must treat it like a novel, and we must shift our understanding of what counts
as philosophy away from the argument to the appeal. This appeal is more open – it
often implies that someone like Descartes was right and wrong, that in our everyday
lives we can feel solipsistic intuitions to be true and still feel them to be fundamentally
false - and it finds its best expression in the literary medium.
2. Simone de Beauvoir’s *L’invitée*: Looking for Recognition in the Theater

2.1 Introduction: How Beauvoir’s Philosophical-Literary Appeal Explodes Sartre’s Theory of the Look

The first chapter of this dissertation established Beauvoir’s theoretical understanding of how philosophical-literary works engage the philosophical tradition while still remaining true to themselves as literature. Beauvoir’s theoretical response to Cavell, it would seem, is that the philosophical-literary work requires a deformation of philosophy, perhaps to the point where philosophy will no longer recognize itself, but perhaps we should think of this deformation as a reformation, as a correction of some of philosophy’s setbacks and an exciting new way of picking up the tradition’s most pressing questions. The philosophical-literary work thus remains literature, and the critic should read it as such, but it still lays claim to philosophy in a significant way.

Having laid this foundation, I now turn to a more detailed examination of Beauvoir’s first novel, *L’invitée* with these critical tools in mind. In my approach to *L’invitée*, I hope to treat the literary form as being inseparable from and constitutive of its philosophical concerns. I hope to focus on the ways in which Beauvoir sees subjective experience as bestowing philosophical meaning onto the imagined events in her literary universe, and I hope to demonstrate the depths of Beauvoir’s ambiguous philosophical appeal in her first “metaphysical” novel. I hope, in other words, to read *L’invitée* in the spirit of Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory.
This reading will take the insights of the last chapter as a starting point. Beauvoir’s first novel does not make an argument about solipsism but rather approaches this traditional philosophical problem in all its ambiguity, as it reveals itself to Françoise’s particular consciousness. In this chapter, I will analyze how Beauvoir’s preoccupation with solipsism results in a particularly Beauvoirian theory of the Look within *L’invitée*. If critics with a traditional approach to philosophical literature have seen *L’invitée* as a literary corollary to *L'être et le néant* – and thus have read Beauvoir as mirroring Sartre’s theory of the Look in her novel – this new approach to the philosophical novel frees us to see the look or the gaze differently. While it may be true that Beauvoir sometimes reveals her characters as looking at each other in the way that Sartre describes in *L'être et le néant*, she also explodes Sartre’s theory of the Look into a multiplicity of meanings that take on importance at different points in the novel. In *L’invitée* there is not a narrative of the look; rather within her novel, Beauvoir extrapolates several, often competing narratives of the look. The gaze for Beauvoir thus emerges at times as conflict, domination, and appropriation, but it also figures as an attempt to merge with the other and to efface one’s awareness of the self, it figures as interpretation and as a shared vision between two people, and it reveals the desire for a form of recognition, for a way to truly see the other as a separate subject without losing the self in the process. These different kinds of looks provide new ways of conceiving of
the self-other relation in Beauvoir’s novel, one that emerges as inherently complex and ambiguous, as any philosophical-literary appeal should be.

2.2 A Philosophical Point of Comparison: Conflict in Sartre’s Theory of the Look

“Chaque conscience poursuit la mort de l’autre.” It is with these words from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* that Beauvoir opens *L’invitée*, and by the end of the novel Françoise does indeed kill Xavière by turning on the gas in the young girl’s apartment.

When critics would like to discuss “the problem of the other” in *L’invitée*, therefore, they consistently cite the novel’s Hegelian epigraph. For many critics, Beauvoir’s philosophical point in *L’invitée* is to concretize this moment in the master-slave dialectic, when two consciousnesses confront and wish to annihilate one another. Given scenes like the one in which Pierre stands at the keyhole jealously watching Xavière in Gerbert’s arms, critics often go on to argue that Beauvoir wishes to illustrate not only Hegel’s dialectic but also Sartre’s appropriation of the dialectic in which the conflict between consciousnesses manifests itself in the existential experience of looking at others and of feeling the other looking back at the self.¹ In other words, they read *L’invitée* in terms of Sartre’s theory of the Look as outlined in *L’être et le néant*.²

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¹ No one discovers Pierre in this embarrassing act in *L’invitée*, and yet, as readings like Hazel Barnes’s and Kate and Edward Fullbrook’s have shown, all of the basic elements of Sartre’s narrative are there, including Pierre’s fear that Françoise will judge him for what he has done.

Although these readings are, in many cases, convincing and well-documented, this chapter will read *L’invitée* for the ways in which Françoise’s experience of looking at and with the other escapes or resists the familiar narrative of conflict and domination found in Sartre. In order to do so, it will be necessary to give a brief, preliminary description of *L’invitée’s* often cited philosophical intertext. Getting clear on the basic narrative of the Look will then lay the groundwork for a lucid picture of how Françoise’s existential experience both supports and subverts Sartre’s theory of *l’être-pour-autrui*.

As Nancy Bauer has convincingly argued, in fact, one can read Sartre’s theory of the Look in *L’être et le néant* as a Sartrean appropriation of the master-slave dialectic. Rather than talking about a physical battle to represent the battle between consciousnesses, however, Sartre describes a rather mundane experience in which a man sits at a keyhole, jealously watching a woman embrace another man. In this moment, he is completely absorbed in the act of watching “un spectacle [qui] se propose comme ‘à voir’” (*L’être et le néant* 298). He therefore does not even notice himself – his self-consciousness slips away – such that he is lost in the world and that he “n’a aucun ‘dehors’” (*L’être et le néant* 298). But suddenly, someone comes down the hallway, and


3 See “The Conditions of Hell: Sartre on Hegel” in Bauer, Philosophy and Feminism 104-35.
the jealous lover is caught crouching in front of someone else’s doorway, peering in.

This has the effect of bringing the man at the keyhole back to himself. “Je me vois parce qu’on me voit,” Sartre writes (L’être et le néant 299, emphasis in the original). Suddenly, the jealous man faces a reified sense of himself as the other sees him. For Sartre, one can never simultaneously have this feeling of being a subject who looks at others and being an object in the other’s gaze. It is always one or the other, and the only way to escape the feeling of being an “objet pour autrui” (L’être et le néant 300, emphasis in the original) is to return the look and judge him in turn.

In writing this section, Sartre adopts and adapts only the beginning of Hegel’s dialectic, stopping at the point at which two consciousnesses face and fight one another. Up until this point, the elements remain the same: consciousness discovers the existence of other consciousnesses and their claim to the for-itself; consciousness feels this claim as a threat to its own sense of itself as for-itself; finally, in response to this threat, consciousness attempts to suppress the other’s for-itself, not through actual, physical violence but through the metaphysical violence of the Look. For Bauer, this half-appropriation is intentional (Philosophy and Feminism 105). Affirming the moment of conflict as the underlying condition of human relations – hell is, after all, other people according to Sartre’s perspective – Sartre rejects reciprocal recognition, Hegel’s eventual resolution in which one could feel oneself and the other to be simultaneously subjects
and objects. This will turn out to be an important modification on Sartre’s part for our comparison here between the Look in *L'être et le néant* and the looks in *L’invitée*.

In *L’invitée*, Beauvoir certainly asserts conflict as a basic aspect of the human condition, and her description of conflict resonates with Hegel’s dialectic in that Françoise would desperately like to prove her being-for-self as essential and finds that the other threatens this project. Her description also resonates with Sartre, for Beauvoir shows the power of the other through the ways in which the other sees (judges, interprets) the self. In both Beauvoir and Sartre, the description of the existential experience of looking at the other unveils deep philosophical truths about how we, as human beings, relate to one another. In this examination of Beauvoir’s philosophical novel, however, many decidedly *un*Sartrean or even *anti*-Sartrean problems will emerge from the literary universe itself, from Beauvoir’s expert manipulation of aesthetic, imagined experience, including a steadfast determination not to give up on reciprocal recognition.

2.3 Seeing a Jacket as Old and Tired: The All or Nothing Proposition of Françoise’s Skepticism

One of the major accomplishments of Sartre’s theory of the Look is its subtle rejection of solipsism. According to Kate and Edward Fullbrook’s argument about *L’invitée*, the existential experience of shame - in which I feel myself to be a fixed thing in
the other’s judgment - demonstrates that others exist outside of my consciousness.\textsuperscript{4} The same could be said of Sartre’s theory of the Look. Although Beauvoir presents a more ambiguous picture of the problem of solipsism in \textit{L’invitée}, she still indicates that this problem looms large in Françoise’s life, and in fact, Françoise’s different ways of looking at and with the other will necessarily engage the fundamental problem underlying solipsism: namely, how a finite being can connect to her world and thus to others in it.

Beauvoir in fact presents finitude - or the fact that we are limited, mortal, sexed beings (\textit{Moi, Ibsen} 206) – as a founding philosophical problem for Françoise through her depiction of a childhood scene in which Françoise first realizes her separation from the world and the possibility of her death. In many ways, this moment appears as the catalyst that sets everything into motion, causing Elaine Marks to note “the primeval quality of the incident” (15).\textsuperscript{5} As the multiplicity of “looks” that Françoise casts at and with the other will result from this original problem, it is worth looking at this scene in detail. In this scene, Françoise discovers an unsettling either/or proposition in her attempts to connect to the other; either she must be what she sees in the world and lose consciousness of herself, or she can know nothing about what she sees. This either/or proposition will haunt her as she looks at others later in life, and she will constantly struggle to get beyond it without success. In other words, her reaction to her finitude in

\textsuperscript{4} For more on the Fullbrooks, see chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp. 49-63.

\textsuperscript{5} In her work Beauvoir often focused on how childhood events could act as a source of an adult’s philosophical or emotional malaise. Such will be the case not only for \textit{L’invitée} but also for \textit{Le sang des autres}. Both novels contain only one childhood scene, and these scenes prove to be pivotal for her main characters’ personal and philosophical development.
this scene will prefigure and help elucidate the different ways in which she will attempt to deal with her separation from others in her world, and each of these attempts to abolish separation will result in a different kind of look.

Beauvoir incorporates the childhood incident in question into her novel by means of a flashback in which a mature Françoise, who has just discovered Xavière’s horrifying consciousness, relates her current anguish to a similar distress she experienced as a child. In this memory, a six year-old Françoise finds herself alone in the corridors of her grandmother’s countryside home, an atmosphere that oddly resembles the corridors of Pierre’s theater at night. Both spaces are empty and dark, both seem hermetically sealed off from other people and the outside world, and both cause Françoise to confront inanimate objects as other or outside of herself. Still, despite these similarities, the child Françoise does not live this moment in a dark place at all in the way that the confident, young Françoise lives her night in the theater. Her grandmother’s home does not offer itself up to Françoise as a world to be discovered and illuminated through her consciousness. Instead, there is something menacing in this world. The shadows stick to things, linger around them like evil spirits on their surface - “sous la console de marbre stagnait une ombre épaisse” (L’invitée 146).

Although one finds the same dichotomies in this scene of light and dark, life and death, self and things, Françoise does not act as the locus of life and light, of subjectivity; rather, she feels trapped alone inside the house with its closed shutters as if inside a tomb. In
the meantime, life goes on outside, out of her reach in a sunlit garden where her family enjoys a spring day. In this scene, rather than giving life to inanimate objects in the world, it seems that inanimate objects threaten her life to the point where an older and reflective Françoise presents her former self as “une petite fille collée contre le mur” who “retenait sa respiration” and who walks with “le cœur serré” (L’invitée 146).

As she moves through this stifling space, Françoise settles upon one object amongst the many that threaten her: an old vest sitting on a chair. Something in that old vest bothers her: “Il était vieux et fatigué mais il ne pouvait pas se plaindre comme Françoise se plaignait quand elle s’était fait mal, il ne pouvait pas se dire ‘je suis un vieux veston fatigué.’ C’était étrange” (L’invitée 146). Thus at six years old, Françoise has uncovered a banality of our everyday world – that objects do not have feelings, that objects do not speak, that I am not the objects around me - and this simple fact truly unsettles her. “[E]lle voyait le veston, il existait et il ne s’en rendait pas compte, il y avait là quelque chose d’irritant, d’un peu effrayant” (L’invitée 146). But why should such a discovery so thoroughly unnerve her? Most people notice such a fact and pass it by as unremarkable and certainly as unthreatening. Françoise, on the other hand, literally feels it as something that restricts her breathing, that pushes her up against a wall, and that ultimately causes her to flee out into the garden with her family in the sunlight.

In her Encounters with Death, Marks undertakes an extensive analysis of this scene and deftly pinpoints the cause of little Françoise’s malaise. For the first time in her
life, Françoise encounters an object as an object, that is to say, as a lack of consciousness and thus as separate from her. Marks writes: “The only significant difference between them is that Françoise can and the jacket cannot speak. Not to be able to “say”... is to lose one’s hold on the known world” (17). Although the fact that this jacket has no hold on the world may not seem like a threatening proposition, it has devastating consequences for the young Françoise. For in fact, the jacket as lack of consciousness reveals the possibility of lack of consciousness in Françoise; this is the meaning of her vague feeling that the inanimate nature of the jacket threatens her life, for its existence elicits the imagined possibility of her death, of her transformation into an inert thing with no thoughts, no feelings, no voice:

Françoise essaya d’imaginer comment ça lui ferait si elle ne pouvait pas se dire “je suis Françoise, j’ai six ans, je suis dans la maison de grand-mère,” si elle ne pouvait absolument rien se dire ; elle ferma les yeux. C’est comme si on n’existait pas; et pourtant d’autres gens viendraient là, ils me verraient, ils parleraient de moi. (L’invitée 146)

In turn, this realization of a lack of consciousness reveals contingency within the world. “À quoi ça lui sert d’exister,” she asks herself, “s’il ne sait pas” (L’invitée 146)? As Marks notes, this discovery of separation and contingency draws Françoise out of herself for the first time. “The verb ‘to imagine,’” she writes, “is Françoise’s first attempt to go beyond her known world, to conceive of other modes of perceiving and being,” and this ultimately leads her to “go beyond the possibility of not being Françoise to the more appalling possibility of not being at all” (18).
This first attempt to go beyond herself, however, fails. Unable to fully imagine this other mode of being – Françoise must, after all, open her eyes again – she attempts to incarnate the vest as consciousness rather than effacing herself into its lack of consciousness. “Puisque moi je peux dire ‘moi,’ si je le disais pour lui,” she asks herself (L’invitée 146). This results, however, in the same kind of failure.

C’était plutôt désappointant ; elle avait beau regarder le veston, ne plus voir que lui et dire très vite : “je suis vieux, je suis fatigué,” il ne se passait rien de neuf ; le veston restait là, indifférérent, tout étranger, et elle était toujours Françoise. (L’invitée 146)

Thus the jacket’s inability “to say” has infected Françoise, and she in turn loses her grip on the world. Even if Françoise were able to speak for the jacket, she would only affect the effacement of herself as Françoise and would instead bring about her incarnation as a vest that could not be conscious of itself as old and tired: “D’ailleurs, si elle devenait le veston, alors elle, Françoise, n’en saurait plus rien” (L’invitée 146). In other words, she could never be herself, as consciousness, and the vest, as lack of consciousness, at once. Thus, as Marks affirms, “The gulf between the subject and the object, the I and the world, is unbridgeable” (19).

What makes Françoise uncomfortable in this scene, therefore, what strikes her as an indefinable “quelque chose d’irritant, d’un peu effrayant” is in fact the disturbing discovery of her own finitude. For this reason Marks describes this scene as one that “marks the first discovery of the self and simultaneously of other people, of the solitude of the self and of its precariousness and mortality” (14). Françoise’s realization of the
jacket as a lack of consciousness and as contingency also uncovers certain limitations in
the little girl herself, limitations due to her body, to her mortality, to her inability to pass
beyond that body and into the external world, her inability to commune in some pure
way with the things around her.

I write here “in some pure way” because this, in effect, is how Françoise would
like to remedy the fact of her finitude. She does not simply want to apprehend the jacket
as old and tired; she wants to be that consciousness of self as old and tired without losing
herself in it. She does not simply want to accept the fact of objects as lack of
consciousness – one which implies the possibility of herself as lack of consciousness –
she wants to become consciousness for them. And here, for the first time, we see
Françoise grappling with problems of skepticism. While she does not go so far as to
doubt the existence of the objects around her – they do in fact exist with an astounding
certainty - she still presents herself with the false choice of the skeptic: if I cannot know a
thing completely, in some pure way, then the gap between me and that object is, to use
Mark’s word, unbridgeable. In other words, Françoise’s way of imagining the gap means
that its bridging must entail complete communion. There is no in between, no means by
which she could bridge the gap halfway. Simply saying that she sees the jacket as old
and tired is not enough. It is all or nothing.
2.4 Bridging the Skeptic’s Gap: From the Old Jacket to Other Human Beings

In Marks’s estimation, Françoise never transcends this moment at which she discovers her own death and her separation from the world:

The anguish... is never overcome. It is evaded and, it would seem, eventually disappears... This anguish, then, is an anomaly. It comes to the fore only on special occasions, when Françoise is alone, withdrawn from the others, who are together. (15)

And yet, the theater scene, especially when Françoise leaves her office to fetch whisky, represents a moment when Françoise is alone, withdrawn from others, and feels anything but anguish. In fact, if Beauvoir links these two scenes through the imagery of dark and light, death and life, for-itself and in-itself, she does so not only to show that they deal with the same philosophical problem but also to highlight the differences in Françoise’s way of living both scenes. In the old jacket scene, Françoise is terrified by her situation and flees. In the theater scene, Françoise seeks out the same kind of situation that had frightened her as a little girl. Rather than feeling anguish, she feels solace, rather than feeling threatened, she feels powerful, almost godlike. How did such a transformation take place? How did Françoise bypass her childhood fear, and can we assume that because Françoise has surpassed this fear, she has found an authentic way to live the fact of her finitude?

In the theater scene, it does seem that Françoise has renounced the extremes of the solipsist’s choice. When she sees the seats of the amphitheater and the red of the
carpet, she does not wish to *be* those objects but contents herself with interpreting those objects within her world. Through her interpretation of them, through the way that she sees them, she annexes them to herself. In the theater scene, we learn that as a young woman rather than a little girl, *seeing* the jacket *as* old and tired would be enough for Françoise. Seeing the chairs in the theatre, for example, as in suspense or in a state of anticipation ("en attente"), Françoise does not wish to become this suspense or anticipation; rather, she confers the qualities of suspense and anticipation onto the chairs and thus brings them to life and into her life, a life in which Pierre’s performances in the theater are very important. Because the chairs as things have no meaning of their own, for themselves, she bestows a human meaning onto them. In this way, she seems to avoid the problems of finitude and contingency.

And yet, even if Françoise lives this moment in the theater with ease, such a connection with the world does not come as effortlessly when it comes to other human beings. In Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of how Françoise lives her consciousness at the beginning of the novel, the reason for her difficulty becomes evident. He writes:

> Je suis donc une conscience, une présence immédiate au monde, et il n’est rien qui puisse prétendre à être sans être pris de quelque façon dans le tissu de mon expérience. Je ne suis pas cette personne, ce visage, cet être fini, mais un pur témoin, sans lieu et sans âge, qui peut égaler en puissance l’infinité du monde. (38)

In his analysis, Merleau-Ponty reveals that Françoise’s way of apprehending the theater in fact denies her own embodiment. Without a face, without a specific age, Françoise
has stepped beyond her body in order to assume the role of pure spirit. Assuming such a role becomes more difficult, however, when she is with others:

Tant qu’il ne s’agit que des choses, nous nous sauvons facilement de la transcendance. Celle d’autrui est plus résistante... [S]i autrui existe, s’il est lui aussi une conscience, je dois consentir à n’être pour lui qu’un objet fini, déterminé, visible en un certain lieu du monde. S’il est conscience, il faut que je cesse de l’être. (Merleau-Ponty)(38, emphasis in the original).

Thus Françoise’s various ways of looking at others constitute her attempts to bridge the gap between herself and the other in a satisfying way, to find a solution to her separation from them.

2.5 Dance, Spectacle, and the Objectifying Look

In Ann-Sofie Persson’s “De la narration du spectacle au spectacle de la narration: L’invitée de Simone de Beauvoir,” she uncovers a wealth of instances in which a critic of L’invitée could analyze the particular intersubjective structure of the look. She does so by highlighting the omnipresent motif of dance and spectacle in the novel.⁶ As early as the second chapter, Françoise and Xavière watch an Arab belly dancer undulate seductively in a North African themed café. From there the dancers proliferate, from Xavière, whom Françoise watches in a Parisian club, to Paule, a friend who performs for

⁶ Barbara Klaw and Kate and Edward Fullbrook also take note of this theme. See Barbara Klaw, “Dancing with Desire: The Rewriting of Sexual Identity from Colette’s Chéri to Beauvoir’s L’Invitée,” Simone de Beauvoir Studies 21 (2004), Fullbrook and Fullbrook, "Clinic and Cave." Sarah Fishwick also discusses the female body as spectacle in the novel. See Sarah Fishwick, "The Fashioned Body in Simone de Beauvoir’s L’invitée and Le Sang des autres,” Corporeal Practices: (Re)figuring the Body in French Studies, eds. Julia Prest and Hannah Thompson, Modern French Identities 4 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000). If I have chosen to highlight Persson’s article here, it is because she so explicitly links spectacle, looking, and domination, all of which are important themes for this chapter.
an intimate gathering at her apartment, to Spanish dancers who wave their castanets.

As Persson astutely points out, the spectacle does not end with a literal performance, with a character or characters watching a woman dance. In some instances the performance becomes figurative as one spectator, through her obvious absorption in the performance, “makes a spectacle” of herself for another spectator.7

Persson then ties this recurrent theme of spectacle in *L’invitée* with what she sees as the underlying Hegelian conflict between Beauvoir’s female characters:

> Comme le suggère l’épigraphe. . . , ce roman s’articule autour du problème de l’Autre et de sa conscience. . . . Cette lutte, principalement engagée entre Françoise et Xavière, semble intimement liée au regard et au spectacle. Afin de contrôler les autres, il s’agit de les réduire à des objets, à en faire du spectacle. (435)

Persson makes a good case for considering conflict and domination integral to these spectacles in *L’invitée*, and she relies heavily upon Laura Mulvey’s theory of the masculine cinematic gaze in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”8 In traditional

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7 This question of absorption in the spectacle will be important to my argument later in this chapter. In particular it suggests a link between Beauvoir’s novel and Michael Fried’s theory of theatricality in Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Fried and Diderot will lead us to other theorists with similar understandings of theatricality, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Toril Moi, and Stanley Cavell. Overall, Beauvoir’s emphasis on absorption will indicate Françoise’s desire to get beyond herself, to step past her limits and merge with another subjectivity.

8 I find the lack of a reference to Sartre’s theory of the Look surprising here. Persson only mentions Sartre once in the entire article, in a footnote (438, n. 21), and in this instance she is not even discussing how Sartre posits the objectifying nature of the other’s look. Yet the kind of visual objectification that Persson associates with Laura Mulvey is exactly the kind of objectification that most critics of *L’invitée* have related to Sartre’s theory of the Look. Persson’s argument thus makes the case for reading *L’invitée* in terms of Sartrean themes of conflict and domination without mentioning Sartre. Phyllis Sutton Morris, “Sartre on Objectification: A Feminist Perspective,” Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre, ed. Julien S. Murphy, Re-Reading the Canon (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999). plausibly links Sartre’s theory of
Hollywood movies, Mulvey famously argued, the camera’s eye roves indiscriminately over a highly sexualized female body, and thus the association of the camera’s eye with that of the heterosexual, desiring male transforms women on screen into submissive sex objects. This filmic effect also invites those in the darkened theater, women and men alike, to identify with the misogynistic gaze and thus to take pleasure in the power it confers upon them.

As Persson points out, Françoise is always a spectator who watches others make a spectacle of themselves.\(^9\) When Paule performs at her apartment, for example, Pierre avidly watches not Paule but the spectacle of Xavière’s ecstatic and visibly physical reaction to Paule. Françoise, in turn, watches the embarrassing spectacle of Pierre’s obvious infatuation with Xavière (L’invitée 183-84). This leads to what Persson calls “un emboîtement de regards” (Persson 441) in which “[s]eule Françoise semble échapper au regard des autres” (435). In other words, Françoise acts as “la spectatrice par excellence” (435), even in a long line of spectators, and she almost never slides into the position of making a spectacle of herself for others.\(^10\) On Persson’s reading of L’invitée, this identifies Françoise with a reifying male gaze similar to that found in Mulvey’s theory.\(^11\)

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9 Of course, Xavière judges Françoise and thus Looks at her in the Sartrean sense, but Beauvoir does not tie this kind of experience to the theme of spectacle.

10 Persson recognizes that this is due in large part to Beauvoir’s narrative strategies, in particular to Beauvoir’s choice to focus the narrative through Françoise’s point of view. If Françoise has unknowingly slipped into the position of being a spectacle for another character, she is not aware of it, and so the reader would not be aware of it either. Persson also notes that exceptions occur when the focal point of the narrative shifts to Pierre’s sister Élisabeth or to Gerbert. Thus other characters have the chance to make a
It is true that Françoise, as our ultimate spectator, consistently highlights women’s corporality, from her attention to the dancing women’s undulating midriffs to her minute detailing of Xavière’s hairstyles, gestures, facial expressions, and clothing. This attention to the body, in turn, objectifies the women that Françoise looks at. As she watches them dance, there is a movement in Françoise’s thought away from an intuition of their subjectivity toward their bodies, which she inevitably conceives of as some kind of thing. Take, for example, this moment when Françoise stands motionless in the middle of a Parisian club, watching others dance around her: “Au centre du dancing, impersonnelle et libre, moi je suis là. Je contemple à la fois toutes ces vies, tous ces visages. Si je me détournais d’eux, ils se défaîtraient aussitôt comme un paysage délaissé” (L’invitée 34). It is as if, in this sentence, Françoise cannot think of others as having lives for too long and must immediately correct herself by focusing on their faces, which inevitably become an inhuman “paysage délaissé.”

spectacle of Françoise and destabilize her status as the ultimate and powerful spectator. Although Persson does not mention it, I think the passage in which Élizabeth watches Xavière dance first with Françoise and then with Pierre particularly supports her argument here. Simone de Beauvoir, L’invitée (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 277-82. In this case Élizabeth judges Françoise from the outside and without sympathy: “[Françoise et Pierre] se rendaient franchement ridicules à traîner partout cette gosse après eux.” Beauvoir, L’invitée 272. Other poststructuralist feminist readings have made the argument that Françoise plays a masculine role in her relationships with the women around her. Jane Heath, “She Came to Stay: The Phallus Strikes Back,” Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader, ed. Elizabeth Fallaize (London, England: Routledge, 1998), for example, argues that Françoise represents the phallic economy within L’invitée, one that attempts to subdue the “feminine” economy of mystery and sexuality incarnated in Xavière.

11 There are other instances in which Françoise’s thought follows this objectifying progression. Take, for example, Françoise’s conversation with Gerbert that I cited in chapter 1. Admitting that she has difficulty seeing “que les autres gens sont des consciences qui se sentent du dedans comme on se sent soi-même,” - a discovery which would be, in her words, “terrifiant” - Françoise quickly claims that how others feel from the inside does not really bother her after all. “Leurs pensées,” she says, “ça me fait juste comme leurs paroles et leurs visages : des objets qui sont dans mon monde à moi.” Beauvoir, L’invitée 18., emphasis added
Critics have often cited Françoise’s ignorance of her own body – her lack of attention to her general appearance, her surprise upon seeing herself in a mirror, etc. While Françoise the spectator has no body, no surface, no limits, others often seem to drown in their bodies, to appear to her as pure body, pure surface, as completely contained within themselves, as an inessential subjectivity inured in and sometimes obscured in an overwhelming corporality. These dancing women are also dripping with sexuality, from the Arab dancer to Xavière herself, whose very hotel room exudes, in Jane Heath’s words, “an atmosphere of evil exoticism and unassuaged desire” (173).

Thus these spectacles of women, without any subjective voice, fit the mold of the eroticized, passive, and submissive creatures from Persson’s description. After citing the scene in the dance club, Persson indeed comes to the conclusion that Françoise dominates women in order to annex them into her world: “En même temps que Françoise s’octroie le rôle du créateur, elle réduit ces personnages à ses personnages, à ses propres créatures, à des choses” (439).

As the founding childhood scene suggests, however, annexation is in fact the goal, and domination here emerges as a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. It is, we will see, just one tactic among many that Françoise uses to unite with the other and thus to deny separation while still leaving her own subjectivity intact. In Beauvoir and Sartre’s existentialism, looking is not simply a physical act of turning one’s

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13See, for example, Fullbrook and Fullbrook, "Clinic and Cave.”
eyes toward another and seeing their body as an object; it is also an act of interpreting
the other, of seeing the other as cowardly or jealous or beautiful. For this reason, looking
in Sartre’s theory becomes synonymous with judging the other and reifying the other as
a set concept. In Beauvoir’s presentation of dancing women in *L’invitée*, interpretation
or “seeing as” also plays a key role. As with the things in the theater, Françoise attempts
to annex women into her universe through the careful interpretation of their bodies and
their faces as signs, through the constant evaluation and reevaluation of *what these signs
mean*. Thus there is a beautiful transparence to their knowing and unknowing
performances, one that instantly transforms their every movement into a sentiment that
Françoise can classify and integrate into the meaning of the world as she sees it. In this
way, the outward manifestations of their subjectivity do not threaten Françoise because
she sees that subjectivity as inessential, as relying on her for its definition:

[Xavière] avait un séduisant visage, si nuancé, si changeant qu’il ne
semblait pas fait de chair ; il était fait d’extases, de rancunes, de tristesses,
rendues magiquement sensibles aux yeux ; pourtant malgré cette
transparence éthérée, le dessin du nez, de la bouche était lourdement
sensuel. (*L’invitée* 75)

Here, at the beginning of the novel, Xavière’s body so perfectly translates her inessential
consciousness that her flesh has transformed into the subjective state that it expresses.
Her feelings and thoughts flutter on the surface like letters on a page, and Françoise, as
the ultimate spectator, reads and interprets those letters.

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14 Toril Moi alludes to this very process of constant interpretation as indicative of the melodramatic bent to
*L’invitée*. See Moi, *Intellectual Woman* 115-43..
Yet, again as with the old jacket, this communion with the other can never be complete. Even as she interprets Xavière, Françoise sees the possibility that her hold on the young girl could slip. Something in Xavière’s “performance” escapes her: a sensual nose and mouth that do not offer Xavière up but rather lock her in her body. In this way, Beauvoir complicates the theory of the look as conferring power on the beholder, for Françoise loses this power at a certain point in the novel. Increasingly, Xavière’s ethereal transparence melts into that sensual question mark of a mouth, and Françoise founders into her peculiar solipsism. In Françoise’s solipsistic moments, Xavière ceases to be an inessential subjectivity that floats on the surface of her body and instead becomes a body that encapsulates an unknowable soul. Often, it is Xavière’s capacity for treachery and deceit that creates this barrier between her and Françoise. Behind the screen of Xavière’s false face agitate her real yet unknowable thoughts with their undecidable meanings. Described as a secret venom, Xavière’s thoughts, desires, and emotions remain outside of Françoise’s reach, tucked away under Xavière’s treacherous face, hard skull, and thick tresses of blond hair that fall into and obscure her face. Xavière’s head even appears as a nut that Françoise would love to crack. In these moments, Françoise sees Xavière’s body but no longer believes in her ability to understand what her movements and expressions mean.

This new way of seeing women as enigmatic or senseless spectacle obscures their subjectivity in a much more dramatic fashion than when Françoise simply saw them as
interpretable objects. Here Françoise goes further, reducing them to physical and sensuous beings who do not speak but rather who produce enigmatic corporal signs which Françoise struggles to decipher. In the world of Françoise the spectator, this is the only form of expression available to other women, this strange, female hieroglyphic which borders on the unreadable. Françoise conceives of the face as a border, as an insurmountable barrier between herself and the women around her, as if in order to understand the subjectivity of the other, all she can rely on is this face, this hieroglyphic which hints at meaning but belies nothing definitive, which is open to interpretation and which can easily deceive. In other words, Françoise conceives of the body as a thing which blocks access to the other’s subjectivity. Once again, an unbridgeable gap looms between the self and the world, only this time it is between the self and others.

2.6 “La même pièce qui se déroulait, dans un même théâtre”: Love and Looking with the Other

Themes of conflict and domination are thus undoubtedly within L’invitée, and these themes arise when Françoise casts an objectifying look at the other. In Beauvoir’s novel, however, she also meticulously describes what happens when one character attempts to share a vision with another. This happens both in love and in friendship, and although this way of looking may sound more appealing than the objectifying gaze, it also constitutes a similar intersubjective failure for Françoise. The same impulse to merge with the other motivates it, and whereas looking at the other’s body as a thing
resulted in the erasure of the other’s subjectivity, seeing with the other threatens to erase Françoise herself.

Once again, Beauvoir elaborates this kind of look through the motif of spectacle, although this time the spectacle takes place in a theater. Françoise’s lover and companion, Pierre, is an actor, and when Françoise watches Pierre in rehearsal, his body does not subsume him but rather makes a brief appearance before melting away, ceding almost immediately to his thought and his vision:

Pierre avait la tête baissée ; . . . que pensait-il ? C’était la première fois qu’il appliquait ses principes esthétiques sur une si grande échelle et avec une pareille vigueur ; il avait façonné lui-même tous les acteurs, Françoise avait adapté la pièce selon ses directives, le décorateur même avait obéi à ses ordres. S’il réussissait, il imposait définitivement sa conception du théâtre et de l’art. (L’invitée 53-54)

Unlike the women who lock themselves in their bodies as they perform for Françoise, Pierre not only acts, he directs. He exercises exact control over the entire environment – over his own body, over the bodies of others, over the shape and colors of the décor, over Françoise herself - thus creating a play that expresses his own personal aesthetic values. When Françoise watches him, he transforms into a pure and (practically) disembodied expression of his subjectivity or consciousness.

Persson concentrates on the recurrence of dance in L’invitée and does not consider theatrical performance in her analysis. She writes: “Malgré l’importance du théâtre dans la diégèse, cet espace et ce type de spectacle restent liés à Pierre” Persson, “Spectacle,” 435. As Beauvoir provides several scenes in which Françoise watches Pierre on stage, I am going to read his status as a performer as important for understanding spectacle and the way that Françoise looks at others. Other types of performance beyond Pierre’s part in Julius Caesar also emerge in L’invitée. Sometimes the performance is literal – as when Gerbert decides to create a marionette show – and sometimes it is figurative – as when Elisabeth repeatedly insists that her life is nothing but a sad “comédie.” These performances are outside the scope of this chapter, but they could also contribute to an understanding of the look in L’invitée.
Even Beauvoir’s decision to have Pierre play Julius Caesar reflects this transformation, for after Caesar’s death he will return as a ghost who haunts his murderers. Thus Xavière claims that in the theater and in real life, she prefers Pierre as a ghost to Pierre as a man:

Vous ressemblez à votre phantôme. Vous étiez beau en phantôme... . [U]n fantôme, ce n’est pas un cadavre... . C’est un être vivant. Seulement son corps lui vient de l’âme, il n’a pas de chair en trop, il n’a ni fain, ni soif, ni sommeil... . Et puis, ce que je trouve poétique, c’est qu’il n’est pas rivé au sol : où qu’il soit, il est en même temps ailleurs. (L’invitée 359-60)

By choosing this role for Pierre, Beauvoir underscores the fact that Pierre’s charm emanates from his ability – on and off stage – to transcend his body and reappear as this diaphanous, ethereal, and almost god-like being.

Hence in watching Pierre perform Françoise does not construct a fiction in which she is the essential and he the inessential; rather, she sees him as an essential, pure spirit with whom she feels that she can merge completely, without his finite body getting in the way. This is a new fiction, a fiction of complete transparency between two people, of total unity in which the boundaries between self and other not only blur but are gone. It is a fiction of the self-same or the “nous.”

Watching Pierre on stage, she thinks:

Both Toril Moi and Catherine Poisson have extensively analyzed Françoise’s assertion that “nous ne faisons qu’un,” and both point out that Beauvoir’s inspiration for Françoise and Pierre’s relationship comes from her relationship with Sartre. Poisson’s entire book, in fact, is dedicated to the building of Beauvoir and Sartre’s identity as a couple and to the reflections of this couple-identity within their writings, both in their fiction and non-fiction. In their letters and in her memoirs, for example, we find that Sartre and Beauvoir consistently declared to one another “nous ne faisons qu’un” and talked of a relationship built upon complete transparency and union. In Poisson’s chapter on L’invitée, she argues that Françoise’s relationship with Pierre has implications for the relationship between Beauvoir and Sartre. For example, Poisson demonstrates that Françoise gives her story over to Pierre in L’invitée, and this parallels the suppression of
When Françoise looks at Pierre as a spectacle, therefore, she does not feel as if she is controlling or dominating him through her gaze but rather as if she is merging with him.

In fact, many of Françoise’s effusions about how she and Pierre “are but one” immediately follow one of his performances as Julius Caesar, and it is clear that Beauvoir associates this experience with a love that transcends the physical:

Elle regarda la nuque de Pierre ; jamais elle ne se lasserait de le voir travailler ; parmi toutes les chances dont elle se félicitait, elle mettait au premier rang celle de pouvoir collaborer avec lui ; leur fatigue commune, leur effort, les unissaient plus sûrement qu’une étreinte ; il n’était pas un instant de ces répétitions harassantes qui ne fût un acte d’amour. (L’invitée 55)

Unlike with the dancing women, the movement in these passages is away from Pierre’s body toward his transcendent qualities. Françoise briefly sees Pierre’s neck before thinking about his work in the theater. She then denies the value of a physical embrace in favor of a pure union of love, “un acte d’amour” emptied of its physicality.

Beauvoir’s picture of the look in love also involves meaning and interpretation, for what Françoise would like to create is a vision of the world that she shares completely with Pierre. While Françoise must interpret the bodies of Xavière and the beauvoir’s individual voice in her memoirs: “tout le récit de Beauvoir semble osciller entre la construction du je et sa perte au profit du nous qui le remplace dès l’ouverture de La Force de l’âge” (71). See Moi, Intellectual Woman, 126-30, Catherine Poisson, Sartre et Beauvoir : du je au nous (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).
dancers before appropriating them into her world, with Pierre no such work to bypass
the body seems necessary; rather, the way to a sense of spiritual union with Pierre the
self-same spirit comes through language much like the way to be at one with an
immortal and ethereal God comes through prayer for the religious devotee. Or
perhaps rather than saying that unity comes through prayer, we should say that it comes
though confession, through a purging of the soul of all that is unclean by revealing its
dark and unseemly corners.

On ne fait qu’un, se répeta-t-elle. Tant qu’elle ne l’avait pas raconté à
Pierre, aucun événement n’était tout à fait vrai... Autrefois... il y avait
pas mal de choses qu’elle laissait comme ça de côté... [E]t puis, peu à
peu, elle avait tout livré... elle était purifiée de ces grouillements confus.
Tous les moments de sa vie qu’elle lui confiait, Pierre les lui rendait clairs,
polis, achevés, et ils devenaient des moments de leur vie. Elle savait
qu’elle jouait le même rôle auprès de lui. (L’invitée 30)

17 If one sees Pierre as a transposition of Sartre into the pages of Beauvoir’s novel, one begins to realize the
richness of such a comparison between Pierre/Sartre and God. As a young girl, Beauvoir was a devout
Catholic, as her mother had always been, and in her childhood she did not suffer from existential crises
because God provided her with meaning and necessity in her life. With the loss of her faith at the age of
fifteen, however, Beauvoir found herself thrown into chaos; no Absolute protected her from the unbearable
absurdities of death and contingency. And yet, in the narrative of her memoirs, Sartre comes along to
replace that lost God. Although he cannot save her from death, her common endeavors with him save her
from a meaningless and isolated life. For example, in La Force de l’âge, Beauvoir writes: “[J]e lui faisais si
totalement confiance qu’il me garantissait, comme autrefois mes parents, comme Dieu, une définitive
sécurité” Beauvoir, Force de l’âge 35, emphasis added. For Beauvoir’s account of her loss of faith in God,
see Simone de Beauvoir, Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée (Paris: Gallimard, 1958) 190-93.

18 Once again there is a striking parallel between Pierre and Françoise’s relationship and that of Beauvoir
and Sartre. Just like her fictionalized couple, Beauvoir and Sartre swore to always tell each other all, a
mantra that was repeated in Beauvoir’s memoirs and letters to Sartre as well as in her interviews. One also
sees this impulse to “tout dire” or tell all when Beauvoir speaks of her motivation for writing, as if she
wanted to create with her readers the kind of perfect, spiritual union she had with Sartre.
If the women display themselves solely through their bodies without speaking, it is no coincidence that Pierre acts in a spectacle which relies heavily on dialogue, for a shared vision is also a shared interpretation of the world.

As when she tried to incarnate herself as the old, tired jacket, her identification with Pierre’s subjectivity, however, will lead to the effacement of her subjectivity. As various critics from Catherine Poisson to Toril Moi have argued, the ideological construct of the “nous” never really provides Françoise with the magical fusion that she desires. In her rush to meld completely with Pierre, she gives herself over to a comforting shared identity in which “I” cedes to “we,” but Pierre’s ascendancy in their personal and professional relationship makes this union a risky venture for Françoise. For this reason, Hazel Barnes writes that Françoise “had allowed herself to become somewhat lost in Pierre” (161), and Toril Moi concludes: “The two of them may well be one, but he is the one they are” (Intellectual Woman 128, emphasis in the original). Thus, on several occasions in L’invitée, Françoise watches the spectacle of the other and does not emerge a victorious subject but rather gets drawn into what Nancy Bauer, in her discussion of Le deuxième sexe, calls the “allure of self-objectification” (“Allure” 273):

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19 This fact is clear even in the small passage where Françoise talks about Pierre’s aesthetic vision, for Françoise follows Pierre’s directives rather than conceiving of her own.

20 If Barnes does not see this loss of the self as philosophically significant, it is only because she asserts that L’invitée counts as philosophy through its relation to L’être et le néant. In fact, I would argue that Barnes merely mentions this aspect of L’invitée without drawing any philosophical conclusions from it precisely because she is reading L’invitée for its Sartrean subplot. Moi, who does not read L’invitée as a Sartrean allegory, gives this desire for unity its rightful emphasis.
[W]hat [Beauvoir] tries to show is that the social norms of sex difference arise from a tacit agreement between men and women. . . to split the difference when it comes to the painful fact of human ambiguity: men will be the subjects and women will strive to be objects. ("Allure" 271, emphasis in the original)\textsuperscript{21}

From \textit{L’invitée} on, Beauvoir’s female characters will struggle with this temptation to objectify themselves in and through their love, with disastrous results for those who give in to temptation (think Élisabeth in \textit{L’invitée}, Paule in \textit{Les Mandarins}, and Monique in \textit{La femme rompue}). Although Françoise escapes the fate of an Élisabeth or a Paule, she still shows that she is not immune to the same kind of temptation. For awhile at least, she gives herself over to a fixed image of her couple with Pierre, thus objectifying herself and relieving herself of any responsibility for her freedom.

If we were searching for the Sartrean narrative of the Look in \textit{L’invitée}, we would not see this temptation as possible. Moi, for example, writes that “the very idea of unity between two lovers runs counter to Sartre’s – and Beauvoir’s – view that every consciousness is pitted in deadly battle against every other consciousness” (\textit{Intellectual Woman} 128). Within \textit{L’invitée}, however, Beauvoir sustains these two contradictory ways of looking at the other. In fact, the temptation toward self-objectification is in many ways related to instances in which Françoise looks at and dominates others in her world. If women in Beauvoir’s fiction stand to lose themselves (and, in some cases, their minds)

\textsuperscript{21} Bauer is referring here to the ways in which Beauvoir highlights women’s complicity in their oppression in \textit{Le deuxième sexe}. This complicity becomes particularly apparent when it comes to the various entrapments awaiting the woman in love, or “l’amoureuse.” Although Bauer is not discussing \textit{L’invitée} here, her analysis could apply to the novel. For Beauvoir’s analysis of l’amoureuse, see Beauvoir, \textit{Deuxième sexe} II: 546-81.
to their love for a man, it is in *L’invitée* that Beauvoir links this loss of one’s self to the overall themes of looking and objectification that most critics have seen as *L’invitée*’s Sartrean strands. Beauvoir creates this link by highlighting that Pierre and the dancing women all perform, knowingly or unknowingly, for Françoise. They all, at one time or another, appear as spectacles to her, and if their performances lead to drastically different reactions on Françoise’s part, it does not change the fact that they are in the same position in relation to her. Love alters the usual narrative of conflict and domination, although not necessarily for the better.\(^{22}\)

As with her way of annexing the dancing women to her, eventually this way of merging with Pierre by sharing his vision will also break down into skepticism. The trouble begins when Françoise dismisses Xavière’s foul moods as mere *boutades*, and Pierre defends Xavière. While this may seem like a trivial disagreement, it dramatically unsettles Françoise’s happy communion with Pierre. When Françoise had claimed that

\[^{22}\text{Although I will not treat this point in detail here because it does not explicitly involve a theory of vision, love is also at stake between Françoise and Xavière. Although Françoise often looks at Xavière as a spectacle in order to objectify and dominate her, she also, curiously enough, asks Xavière to join her and Pierre in their seemingly perfect, transparent union. After pointing out the troubles that she, Xavière, and Pierre have experienced in their relationship thus far, Françoise exclaims: “Tout pourrait être si bien au contraire... Un couple bien uni, c’est déjà beau, mais comme c’est plus riche encore trois personnes qui s’aiment les unes les autres de toutes leurs forces... Car en somme c’est bien une espèce d’amour qu’il y a entre vous et moi” Beauvoir, *L’invitée* 263. She has similar hopes for this union, as when Françoise hopes Xavière will share with her a deeply personal secret: “d’une seule phrase Xavière allait créer ce que Françoise désirait depuis si longtemps : une union totale qui confondrait leurs joies, leurs inquiétudes, leur tourments” Beauvoir, *L’invitée* 398-99. In other words, Françoise invites Xavière in, and if Beauvoir’s title is to be any indication, this invitation to Xavière to merge seamlessly with her (and Pierre) resurfaces again and again in *L’invitée*. We could also read Xavière’s rejection of Françoise’s invitation as another reason – beyond the fact that she reifies Françoise in her judgment – for conflict in the novel. Françoise thinks: “Xavière l’avait repoussée. Elle voulait bien pleurer devant Françoise, mais non pas lui permettre de partager ses larmes. Françoise se retrouvait seule devant une conscience solitaire et rêvive” Beauvoir, *L’invitée* 399.\]
she and Pierre were watching “la même pièce qui se déroulait, dans un même théâtre” (Beauvoir *L’invitée*) (61), what she meant was that they saw the same world endowed with the same meaning. Now they suddenly see a play with drastically different heroines, for where Pierre sees a fiercely independent, free-spirited, and darkly complicated young girl, Françoise sees an irrational and impetuous child. As Françoise puts it, “ils ne la voyaient pas avec les mêmes yeux” (Beauvoir *L’invitée*) (77), and this image of no longer seeing the world “*with the same eyes*” perfectly encapsulates the breakdown of Françoise’s delusions that she could reach beyond her finitude.

Before Xavière’s arrival, Françoise and Pierre would have recuperated their unity through language. They would have discussed this difference in opinion, recounted what they had seen, and come to an agreement as to *how things were*, as to the shared truth that they were both witnessing. And yet, here Pierre could talk all day long about his “*petite perle noire,*” and Françoise would not understand. She simply *would not see* what Pierre sees, with the same eyes. Pierre’s words have failed to unite them in one vision, and what suffers is Françoise’s belief not only in her fusion with Pierre but also in language itself. Once there is something that Pierre cannot tell her, once his words cannot convey or contain within them his admiration for Xavière, *all of his words* become suspect. The magic of “*telling all,*” of sharing one’s story, suddenly loses its charm, and this leads us back to one of Françoise’s skeptical moments from chapter one:

*Quand ils s’adressaient à elle, les mots, les sourires de Pierre, c’était Pierre lui-même ; soudain, ils lui apparaissaient comme des signes*
In this case her skepticism emerges from a failure of words since the gap that opens up is between Pierre’s words and Pierre himself. If his impassioned speeches on stage had led her to his vision, here they come across simply as artifice, as lines recited by an actor who may not really feel what he says he feels.

Once skepticism has tainted Françoise’s philosophical viewpoint, it has consequences not only for how she thinks about Pierre’s words but also for how she thinks about his body. As Hazel Barnes notes: “The difference in their evaluation of Xavière makes Françoise see Pierre as an opaque being with whom she can no longer feel absolute unity” (160). I find Barnes’s use of the word “opaque” to be telling. Once Pierre’s words do not carry Françoise to his glorious selfsame spirit, it is as if Pierre’s diaphanous, ghost-like body has solidified: “[C]ette phrase-là, ç’avait été une phrase concertée, une phrase pour étranger et elle avait atteint son but. Derrière le paravent, c’était un étranger qui se lavait les dents” (L’invitée 143). Aware of his words as artifice, she begins to see him as a stranger who is separated from her even in the physical sense, and rather than merging into Pierre’s aesthetic vision, she suddenly finds before her a

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23 See pp. 52 of chapter 1 of this dissertation for a discussion of Françoise’s skepticism and her loss of faith in words.

24 Again Barnes does not acknowledge that such a desire for complete unity and its unraveling does not appear in Sartre’s narrative of self-other relations in L’être et le néant, which Barnes would so like to map onto L’invitée.
man doing the absolutely mundane task of *caring for his body*, of brushing his teeth. Pierre, who never had a body before, takes one on now, and it is not a body that incarnates his subjectivity or is the site of his subjectivity. Rather, it is a body that hides his subjectivity. Pierre is somewhere *in* there, behind his body, buried under the facticity of flesh.

There is an eerie parallel between the dancing women who had degenerated into inscrutable hieroglyphs and Pierre’s words that suddenly appear as unreadable signs. The problem, in fact, remains the same, for each of these kinds of solipsism emerges from Françoise’s all or nothing proposition. If she cannot connect to Pierre completely, in some absolute way, then she cannot know him at all, and an unbridgeable gap opens between herself and the world, between herself and Pierre.

### 2.7 Looking On Stage for Recognition: *L’invitée* and Visual Theories of Theater

After a careful analysis of Beauvoir’s *L’invitée*, it seems that the novels calls for us to read it not only in relation to Sartre’s theory of the Look but also in relation to theories

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25 I find it significant that Beauvoir chooses to talk about Pierre brushing his teeth here. In this instance, she has her heroine focus on a particularly *dead* part of the body, on the teeth which, on the outside at least, have no feeling and which will last long after Pierre himself has passed. This does not seem to be a coincidence. Time and time again, Beauvoir’s characters focus on body parts like this, body parts which grow but do not feel sensation. Thus, they often file or examine their nails and hide behind or fixate on their hair. It is as if in these moments where they focus on a body part that occupies a liminal place between a living and a dead thing, Beauvoir’s characters are made aware of the possibility of their bodies *as dead*, as things which could be separate from their souls or their subjectivity. Thus these details seem to indicate moments in which Beauvoir’s characters see their mind and body as split, as dissociated. The end of *Les Mandarins* reinforces this reading. When the main character, Anne, is undergoing a crisis similar to Françoise’s, she thinks about her husband Robert’s teeth: “Et moi, je regardais ses dents; il n’y a que ça de déloyal dans un corps : les dents où le squelette se découvre.” Simone de Beauvoir, *Les mandarins*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) II: 494.
that deal with spectacles. I will thus turn now to theories of theater, specifically to what I will call *visual* theories of theater. In this section, I will thus be examining a cluster of theoretical works on the relationship between a spectator and a performer in a theater, all of which resonate with or comment upon one another. These include the theories of Denis Diderot, Michael Fried, Toril Moi, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Stanley Cavell. All of these theories also take seriously the fact that theater is a visual art – in some instances, as in Diderot and Fried for example, the comparison to painting is explicit - and that the way of looking at the other in a theater alters or enhances certain aspects of intersubjective relations and thus provides insight into how human beings would like to connect with one another. Eventually these visual theories of theater will provide a more coherent picture of why Françoise consistently posits herself as the ultimate spectator and the other as a literal or figurative performer.

Starting with Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of theater – one which also alters the narrative of the Look for the theater – will provide a good point of departure, for although Sartre’s theory resonates with the others, his is missing a very key element: namely, the desire for recognition or connection through theater as an art form. As we have seen, this is implicitly what Beauvoir’s Françoise is reaching for as she watches the spectacle of others, and so Beauvoir’s picture of visual theater resonates more clearly with Diderot, Fried, Moi, and Cavell. A comparison of Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary
picture to these theories will thus help elucidate the point at which she departs from Sartre’s narrative of the Look.

In a lecture given in 1944 entitled “Pour un théâtre de situations,” Sartre explains that the theatrical situation significantly alters the narrative of the Look that he had just expounded in *L'être et le néant*. In particular, looking in a theater freezes the battle between consciousnesses because the performer does not and cannot look back at the spectator without in some way ruining the aesthetic effect that theater should have. Sartre writes: “[L]e spectateur est mis hors jeu. Il peut regarder mais il ne sera jamais regardé” (*Théâtre* 25-26). This kind of relationship, on Sartre’s reading, is not only desirable - “[n]ormalement, le spectateur doit être regard pur au moment où la pièce commence” (*Théâtre* 26) – it also constitutes the allure of theater as an art form. If the spectator enjoys theater, it is because the play allows for the complete effacement of one’s awareness of the self, a process which Sartre calls “une cérémonie magique d’anéantissement” (*Théâtre* 26). Sartre explains:

[L]e spectateur perd son moi, s’il s’en souvient au cours du spectacle, c’est qu’il y a des longueurs ; par exemple, les acteurs peuvent proposer une coupure parce que les strapontins du théâtre où l’on joue ont un peu trop crié à un moment donné : cela signifie que le spectateur se souvient qu’il a des jambes et qu’il est mal à l’aise. (*Théâtre* 26)

If a spectator lets go of his ego and in a sense of himself, therefore, it is through forgetting his own embodiment. In fact, it is a re-awakening of the spectator’s sense of himself as body, as legs that cramp or tingle after hours of immobility, that catalyzes the
re-emergence of his sense of himself, of his awareness that he has a *moi*. This awareness in turn breaks the theatrical spell, takes the spectator out of the imaginary world in which he exists only as a “regard pur” (*Théâtre* 26), as a pair of eyes that see without a body to be seen.

The resonance between this theory and Beauvoir’s picture of Françoise as a spectator lies right on the surface of the text. The goal for Françoise in positing herself as a spectator, it would seem, is to become this “regard pur,” to see without being seen and to step beyond her body. In *L’invitée*, in fact, Françoise discusses theater in precisely these terms. Watching the rehearsal for *Julius Caesar*, she expresses the following hope for opening night:

> Ce serait la même nuit dans la salle. . . mais au lieu du silence ils rencontraient tout un monde de bruits : les sièges craqueraient, des mains distraites froisseraient le programme, des vieillards tousseraient avec entêtement. A travers des épaisseurs et des épaisseurs d’indifférence, les phrases subtiles devraient se frayer un chemin jusqu’à un public blasé et indocile. Tous ces gens attentifs à leur digestion, à leur gorge, à leurs beaux vêtements, à leurs histoires de ménage, les critiques ennuyés, les amis malveillants, c’était une gageure de prétendre les intéresser aux perplexités de Brutus ; il faudrait les prendre par surprise, malgré eux. (*L’invitée* 53)

Here Françoise feels that theater should make its spectators forget about things like their hands, their throats, and their digestion, and thus Sartre and Beauvoir’s Françoise share
a belief that theater should efface the spectators’ sense of their bodies and constitute them as a “regard pur.”

Whereas Sartre sees theater as erasing the spectator’s body, Toril Moi points out in her *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* that theater also has the effect of highlighting the performer’s body. “Theater,” Moi writes, “is the art of finitude, the art form that most strongly embodies human separation; it is also the most external of arts, the one that challenges us most intensely to acknowledge human expressions” (*Ibsen* 270). Although Moi goes on to talk about linguistic expression, we could also see theater as “embod[y]ing human separation” and “challeng[ing] us to acknowledge human expression” through its emphasis on bodily expression. In other words, the

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26 I am being careful here to write “Sartre and Beauvoir’s Françoise” rather than “Sartre and Beauvoir.” It may be true that Beauvoir often has her characters discuss the purpose of art in her novels in order to have them express her own aesthetic theories. In *Le sang des autres*, for example, the main character Jean explains to his friend Denise the shortcomings of her first novel: “Vous dites ce qu’il faut penser d[es personnages] : vous ne le montrez pas. Ils sont terriblement abstraits.” Simone de Beauvoir, *Le sang des autres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 181. In another instance, Marcel explains why he has started painting again after a long hiatus: “Je voulais que mon tableau existe tout seul, sans avoir besoin de personne. Pour de vrai, ce sont les autres qui le font exister” Beauvoir, *Le sang* 283. In both instances, these aesthetic discussions should remind us of Beauvoir’s own thoughts on the purpose of literature in Simone de Beauvoir, “Que peut la littérature?,” *Que peut la littérature?*, ed. Yves Buin (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1965), vol. Simone de Beauvoir, “Littérature et métaphysique,” *L’existentialisme et la sagesse des nations*, ed. Michel Kail (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). and , Simone de Beauvoir, “Mon expérience d’écrivain,” *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir: La vie, l’écriture*, eds. Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). Still, it is dangerous to assume that the views of a character are synonymous with Beauvoir’s personal views, aesthetic or otherwise. In writing *L’invitée*, Beauvoir is providing a picture of how Françoise lives her philosophical world, and sometimes Françoise, in her human fallibility, turns out to be wrong, to be, in existentialist terms, in bad faith.

theater asks its spectator to recognize that the way she knows the other is through the body, through voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Thus, theater reminds us that we are finite by externalizing human subjectivity, by tying it into the body more explicitly than novels and poetry do, and yet, unlike painting and sculpture, it conserves the notion of such subjectivity as a fluid and unstable expression, as ephemeral movement, as gesture, as grimace or grin.28

Françoise’s experience of watching the dancing women and of interpreting Xavière’s body reaffirms both this aspect of theater and Sartre’s affirmation that the spectator should become a regard pur. Like an audience member, motionless and immersed in the dark, Françoise would like to become absorbed in the spectacle of the other, to forget herself and thus lose sight of herself as an embodied and finite being. In so doing she must read or attempt to read gestures and facial expressions on stage as signifying a subjective state. This means that the women in L’invitée (dancing or otherwise) often represent this particular aspect of theater cut off from the dialogue that usually accompanies it.29 If Françoise moves so quickly from lives to faces, from thoughts to words to faces, it seems that she would like to structure her relations with others in the real world as they would be structured in a theater. What Françoise wants

28 Of course, novels or poetry could describe gestures without explicitly assigning any meaning to them, and an actor could speak about his subjective states, but the novel still lacks the actual, physical presence of a body and thus we feel the embodiment of a character’s emotions less.

29 Diderot discusses dance in similar terms. In the Entretiens, Diderot calls for the revalorization of what he calls “pantomime,” or gesture and facial expression, in contemporary theater. In particular, he feels that playwrights should incorporate more directives about corporeal expression into the script. He then claims that danse “est une pantomime mesurée” (162).
out of the spectator-performer relationship, in other words, is to be able to interpret the other as body without being reminded that she has a body to be interpreted.

Still, there is a problem inherent in her approach to women in her world as if they were performers on a stage, for Françoise’s attempts at connection through theater ultimately fail. In Stanley Cavell’s visual theories of theater, we get a sense of why. As Cavell argues, theater does in fact create an immense intersubjective gulf between spectator and performer because this relationship is actually between a spectator and a performer/character. In Cavell’s “The Avoidance of Love,” such an ambiguity between performer and character creates a situation in which the spectator at once confronts a character – desiring to react with “advice or warning or compassion or anxiety” (319) - and at the same time does nothing and can do nothing to alter that character’s situation, for the moment the spectator intervenes, the character melts away, and a performer takes her place. “The usual joke,” Cavell writes, “is about the Southern yokel who

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30 Throughout his chapter, Stanley Cavell struggles with the possible objection that his argument rests on elaborating the relationship between a real person, the spectator, and a fictional person, the character on stage. Thus, in typical Cavellian style, he throws in an objection as if he were having a conversation with another critic or perhaps even with a part of himself that is skeptical of his own argument: “‘Surely,’ it will be said, ‘whatever all this is supposed to mean, it is not relevant to our relation to those figures up there... You forget this is theater; that they are characters up there, not persons; that their existence is fictional; that it is not up to us to confront them morally, actually enter their lives’” Cavell, “Avoidance,” 318. And yet, as Cavell works through this objection, he shows that separating character from performer is not as easy as one might think. For example, attempts to separate the character, Desdemona, from the woman who plays her, Mrs. Siddons prove more complicated than simply saying one is real and the other fictional: “You can say there are two women,” Cavell writes, “Mrs. Siddons and Desdemona, both of whom are mortal, but only one of whom is dying in front of our eyes. But what you have produced is two names. Not all the pointing in the world to that woman will distinguish the one woman from the other... [Pointing here has become an incoherent activity” Cavell, “Avoidance,” 328, emphasis in the original.
rushed to the stage to save Desdemona from the black man. What is the joke? That he
doesn’t know how to behave in a theater’” (“Avoidance” 327)?

On her reading of Cavell, Moi does not see the joke about the yokel as having to
do with theater etiquette but rather with a lack of understanding on the yokel’s part as
to the ways in which theater separates the spectator from the performer/character:

Theater requires two groups of people – actors and audience – to share a
certain space for a certain period of time, while acknowledging that they
are separate, and that they have different responsibilities to each other. . . .
The yokel’s problem. . . is that he has not understood that the characters are
in our presence, but we are not in theirs. (Ibsen 206, emphasis in the original)

Perhaps we could rephrase this to say the following: what the yokel does not
understand is that we can enter into the character’s space only through our own erasure.
The moment we draw attention to ourselves, the theatrical space impinges again upon
the fictional one, and the fictional melts away, taking the character with it. Theater,
then, is also “the art of finitude” because it immobilizes the spectator even in the midst
of her desire to act within the world of the other, because it holds the spectator outside
of the character’s universe all while asking her to care about what goes on there.

Sartre’s argument in his 1944 speech prefigures and parallels those of Cavell and
Moi. Along with the spectator’s seemingly powerful position as a “regard pur,” as
someone who can Look at the other without the danger of being Looked at, comes an
astounding impotence, one in which the desire to respond to the character’s situation
ends in failure. Again comes the example of uncultured spectators – in this case, the
spectators of “popular” theater – who attempt to break through the wall that separates them from the figures on stage:

Dans beaucoup de pièces représentées dans les théâtres populaires, on entend les spectateurs crier ‘ne bois pas,’ lorsqu’il s’agit de boire un poison, ou ‘dépêche-toi’ s’il s’agit de sauver l’héroïne, mais le spectateur crie avec un sentiment d’impuissance. . . et ceci est au fond de la nécessité de distance. (Théâtre 26)

In Sartre’s estimation, a play must cultivate a feeling in the spectator that she is cut off from the arena of action, that she is separated just as definitively from the other who acts (in both senses of the word) as she is from a figure in a dream. Sartre writes:

“l’événement, même si je puis un peu le prévoir, ne pourra en aucune façon être arrêté par moi; si je criais, j’arrêterais l’acteur mais non pas Hamlet” (Théâtre 26). Once again, when we as spectators act upon our investment in the character’s life, the character melts away, and a performer takes his place; we wanted to stop Hamlet from killing Polonius, and instead we have stopped an actor from stabbing drapes with a wooden knife.

When Pierre is on stage, however, this picture of the spectator-performer relationship does not exactly fit, for Françoise somehow avoids seeing his body at all and instead identifies so strongly with him that she risks losing herself. What Sartre described as losing one’s ego (“perdre son moi”) has the effect in L’invitée of connecting her to Pierre as spirit, and even if this connection ends up failing, I would like to highlight that this is the goal for Françoise the spectator. This leads us to two other
theorists, Denis Diderot - whose aesthetic theories seem to ground at least some of Sartre’s argument - and Michael Fried’s interpretation of Diderot.

On one hand, Diderot reaffirms Cavell, Moi, and Sartre’s sense of theater as emphasizing human finitude. As Fried points out, one of the defining characteristics of Diderot’s aesthetic writings in general is his insistence that the artist (and here I am considering not only painters but also playwrights and actors to be artists) create a palpable barrier between the beholder and the characters in the fictional space of the artwork or play. Diderot calls for artists to cultivate this barrier in two related ways: 1) they must present their characters as so absorbed in an action or passion that they are completely oblivious to everything else around them, including the beholder; and 2) they must not think of their audience while creating their work of art or while performing on stage. Fried perceptively sees both of these directives for artists as stemming from a larger aesthetic principle, one that was based on Diderot’s concept of absorption.

In Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot, Fried defines absorption as the “persuasive representation of . . . the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or . . . absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling” (10). Despite the artistic figure’s engrossment in his or her own feelings, thoughts, etc., Fried ties absorption to an “oubli de soi or self-forgetting, an obliviousness to [one’s] appearance and surroundings” (13) or to “unconsciousness”
and “sleep” (31). An absorptive figure then becomes so caught up in an emotion, passion, or thought that she does not remember herself, that she does not remember who she is or where she is.

Fried argues that absorption is a concern throughout aesthetic writings and practice in the 18th century in general, and he points out that it is all over Diderot, who highlights a certain abandon or neglect in the attitude of artistic figures that he admires.31 Perhaps the figure in question has lost herself to an emotion, as in Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s Une jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort: “Que son visage a de l’expression,” Diderot writes. “Elle est à son malheur, elle y est toute entière” (Œuvres esthétiques 533). Or perhaps the figure has lost himself to his philosophical thoughts, as Diderot feels he should have been portrayed in Louis Van Loo’s portrait of him (in the following quotation Diderot refers to himself in the third person): “[I]l fallait le laisser seul, et l’abandonner à sa rêverie. Alors sa bouche se serait entr’ouverte, ses regards distraits se seraient portés au loin” (Œuvres esthétiques 510).

Diderot did not limit this demand to painting but instead imagined a new kind of visual theater in which “le spectateur est . . . comme devant une toile, où des tableaux divers se succéderaient par enchantement” (“Discours” 276). Whenever Diderot gives

31 Fried demonstrates this first point by citing the work of the following critics as precursor’s to Diderot: Abbé de la Porte, Baillet de Saint-Julien, Abbé Laugier, Abbé Garrigues de Froment, and Abbé Le Blanc, among others. Once Diderot begins writing, Fried focuses on his work, taking it as emblematic of larger themes within art criticism of the time. Fried also shows that many 18th century artists created their art with these aesthetic ideals in mind. His examples include Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, Carle Van Loo, and Jacques-Louis David.
examples of such “tableaux,” they highlight precisely the absorption of the play’s characters. Hence when Dorval imagines a “tableau . . . de la mere désolée” (“Fils” 116), the woman in this “tableau” sees her son’s dead body and completely loses herself to her grief: “Elle a vu. Elle se rejette en arrière. La force l’abandonne, et elle tombe sans sentiment entre les bras de celui qui l’accompagne. Bientôt sa bouche se remplira de sanglots” (“Fils” 117, emphasis added).

Although Diderot wrote in an entirely different historical, social, and philosophical milieu, Beauvoir’s novel in fact lends itself very well to a reading of Xavière as an “absorptive figure,” to use Fried’s phrase. This is especially true in the moments when Xavière becomes an unknowing spectacle for Françoise and/or Pierre. Compare, for example, Diderot’s interpretation of the jeune fille or his ideal portrait or his mère désolée with this description of Xavière watching Paule dance: “[L]a bouche entrouverte, les yeux embués, Xavière respirait avec peine ; elle ne savait plus où elle était, elle semblait hors d’elle-même” (L’invitée 184). Another example, again when Françoise and Xavière watch a woman dance, casts Xavière in similar absorptive terms: “Ses pommettes étaient roses, elle ne contrôlait plus son visage et ses regards suivaient les mouvements de la danseuse avec un ravissement hébété” (L’invitée 353). Here we have the same abandon, the same ecstasy as in Diderot, and it always occurs when Xavière “makes a spectacle of herself” without realizing that she is doing so.
The very fact that Xavière does not know she is being watched actually reinforces a reading of her as an absorptive figure given Diderot’s vehement assertion that theater should separate the beholder from the writer or performer, that if a play is to count as a successful work of art, it must cultivate this separation. Not only should an artist portray a character that is unaware of the beholder, Fried notes, but he should also create the impression that his artwork was not made to be beheld. Fried thus argues that one of the reasons why 18th century critics considered portraiture a “lesser genre” was because of “the sitter’s presentation of himself or herself to be beheld” (109). Fried bases his assertion on Diderot’s distaste for paintings or plays in which a figure knowingly puts him or herself on display. Once again, therefore, Xavière fulfills Diderot’s criteria for absorptive figures, for Françoise feels that Xavière’s “visage de possédé n’était pas fait pour être vu” (L’invitée 184).

Parallel absorption can even provide an alternate reading of Persson’s curious “emboîtement de regards,” for this emboîtement further casts Xavière as an absorptive figure. Diderot returns again and again to paintings in which one fictive character becomes absorbed in another, as in an engraving of Luciana Borzone’s Belisarius Receiving Arms.32 In this painting, a soldier allows himself to be taken up in the emotion of seeing his once great general reduced to mendacity. Here Diderot creates an emboîtement similar to Beauvoir’s as he looks at the soldier who looks at Belisarius, and

32 Diderot mistakenly calls this an engraving after Van Dyck.
Diderot praises how the artist rendered his character’s complete abandon, how he portrayed “l’étonnement de ce soldat et [le] morne silence du soldat. . . qui, la tête penchée, les mains posées sur le pommeau de son épée, regarde et pense” (Œuvres esthétiques 520). He then affirms that the arresting qualities of the soldier qualify the Belisarius as a superior work of art. According to Diderot’s logic, this is because the soldier’s absorptive attitude allowed him a connection to the soldier and thus to Belisarius and furthermore to the Belisarius: “Si l’on était à côté du soldat, on aurait sa physionomie, et on ne le remarquerait pas en lui. Le Bélisaire, ne fait-il pas l’effet qu’il doit faire? Qu’importe qu’on le perde de vue!” (Œuvres esthétiques 520).

Xavière’s status as an absorptive figure in L’invitée has particular implications for a reading of Françoise the spectator, for absorptive figures have an aesthetically significant effect on the spectator herself. The fact that Diderot imagines “being next to” (à côté de) the soldier is significant, for Diderot sees absorption in a fictional personage as a means to transform the beholder into an absorptive figure as well. “It is as if a properly absorptive work of art also produces an absorbed beholder,” Moi writes, “that there is a parallel between the work of art’s representation of absorption and the viewer or reader’s ability to lose him or herself in the work of art” (Ibsen 115). And as Fried notes, this absorption effectively erases the beholder:

[A] painting, it was insisted, had to attract the beholder, to stop him in front of itself, and to hold him there in a perfect trance of involvement. At the same time... it was only by negating the beholder’s presence that this could be achieved: only by establishing the fiction of his absence or
nonexistence could his actual placement before and enthrallment by the painting be secured. (103)

For this reason, playwrights and actors must foster, in Fried’s words, “the illusion that the audience did not exist, that it was not really there or at least had not been taken into account” (96). Similarly, in the case of painting, the artist must “create the supreme fiction that the beholder did not really exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas” (103).

What is arresting here is Fried’s link between the attraction of a work of art and erasure. Quite simply, for the beholder, absorption seems to be the draw, and absorption means an erasure of one’s awareness of oneself. It is as if the beholder wants to feel what she sees on stage or on the canvas; she wants to feel ecstatic, to feel drawn outside of herself, to forget herself. That is why absorptive art holds and captivates her, because it provides the erasure she wants. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that absorption provides an expansion or an escape. What Diderot describes again and again in his descriptions of absorption is ecstasy, and ecstasy implies not necessarily an erasure of the self but rather a displacement of the self, a venturing of the self beyond the boundaries of the body.

We have returned, it may seem, to Sartre’s theory of theater, for what the spectator desires in absorption is a leaving behind of herself as a finite and embodied being, an erasure of her body as a limitation. Sartre’s “cérémonie magique d’annéantissement” in fact has all the earmarks of what Michael Fried calls “absorption”
in Diderot. Diderot, however, offers more. He does not see erasure as the ultimate goal of absorption but rather as a stepping stone to something greater, as a way of creating an otherwise impossibly profound connection between beholder and object, between beholder and performer, and between beholder and artist. This desire for a profound connection emerges again and again within Diderot’s aesthetic writings, and it usually figures as an ardent desire for the work of art (and through it the artist or performer) to touch the beholder’s heart and soul. Diderot writes:

> Le poète, le romancier, le comédien vont au cœur d’une manière détournée, et en frappant d’autant plus sûrement et plus fortement l’âme, qu’elle s’étend et s’offre d’elle-même au coup. ("Discours" 196)

Art in Diderot may even do more than simply move the beholder to connect with the object before her or even to connect with the artistic figures and their emotion or thoughts. Such an intuition comes through Diderot’s description of artistic creation:

> Le poète sent le moment de l’enthousiasme; c’est après qu’il a médité. Il s’annonce en lui par un frémissement qui part de la poitrine, et qui passe, d’une manière délicieuse et rapide, jusqu’aux extrémités de son corps. Bientôt ce n’est plus un frémissement; c’est une chaleur forte et permanente qui l’embrase, qui le fait haleter, qui le consume, qui le tue; mais qui donne l’âme, la vie à tout ce qu’il touche. ("Fils" 98)

In this exquisite passage, Diderot connects the poet’s ecstasy with the poet’s soul and life by saying that the ecstatic moment of inspiration leads to the infusion of the poet’s soul and life into “tout ce qu’il touche.” It is almost as if Diderot is describing the violent movement of the soul through the body, to the body’s limit (“jusqu’aux extrémités”) and out into the world, out, I suppose, into the work of art. If this is true, if the
“frémissement” that Diderot describes is in fact the movement of the soul, then Diderot wants art to provide nothing short of a deep connection between two souls.

This bonding of souls should remind us more of themes of love and unity in *L’invitée* than themes of dominance and possession, and one could argue that Diderot’s old-fashioned essentialist notion of the “soul” emerges in Beauvoir’s modern work as the existentialist “subject” while the hope for a connection between souls becomes a hope for intersubjectivity. From here it begins to make sense why someone as afraid of her finitude as Françoise would transform any relationship she had with other human beings into a figurative theatrical spectacle. Because theater *is*, as Moi puts it, the “art of finitude,” Françoise sees in it the possibility of connection to the other while still remaining separate. She sees in theater, in other words, the hope of recognition, the hope that she could look at the other and truly *see* her and vice versa.

Despite Diderot’s effusive proclamations that art can touch the beholder’s soul and that the artist can infuse his “soul” and “life” into “everything he touches,” Fried believes Diderot’s very careful guidelines on how to structure the art-beholder relationship reveal an anxiety at the heart of Diderotian aesthetics. In Diderot’s mind, art as it stood – and particularly theatrical art as it stood - was simply not doing its job; it was not providing the deep emotional response and connection that he desired. This reveals, in Fried’s words:

> the problematic character not only of the painting-beholder relationship but of something still more fundamental – the object-beholder (one is
tempted to say object-`subject`) relationship which the painting-beholder relationship epitomizes. (103-04)

Consequently, Fried argues, if Diderot imagined a new form of art, it was to stave off the possibility that the play or the painting could leave the viewer cold, that he could feel untouched by it, indifferent towards it. What was problematic for the spectator was “an implicit alienation from the objects of his beholding,” one that caused Diderot to “insist[…] on the need for painters to overcome that alienation in their work” (104-05). While Fried may be talking about alienation from objects, we can read Diderot’s repeated insistence that art provide a gateway to the soul – and that elaborate artistic devices are needed to get there - as an indication that Diderot also saw alienation from other human beings as a problem, one that art could remedy.

In the context of *L’invitée*, Diderot’s theory proves illuminating, for both Diderot and Françoise express an anxiety about the subject-object relationship, an anxiety that hovers around an unspoken problem of how we are to connect to the objects and to others in our world, and both see the structuring of a specific kind of theatrical relationship as a remedy to this unspoken problem. Both, in other words, point to solipsism as a serious anxiety which requires the careful structuring of a theatrical relationship as a solution. Diderot’s theory of theater, along with the others considered here, gives us fresh insight into why Françoise continually positions or posits herself as a spectator in relation to the other. Françoise’s way of looking at others in her world as spectacle does not constitute some inescapable ontological truth; rather it is the
complicated way in which Françoise intentionally structures her relationship to other human beings, and she does so in order to battle the two-pronged threats of assuming her finitude on the one hand and falling into solipsism on the other.

### 2.8 Conclusion: Sartre’s Look and the Solipsist’s Choice

In order to circumvent this problem of her finitude, Françoise attempts to structure her relationship with others into two different spectacles of the other. In the first she reduces the other to a body and thus annexes the other to her. In the second she tries to step outside of her body as a pure spirit that will then merge with the other as pure spirit. In both instances, Françoise discovers a fatal flaw in her approach to the other. In the first instance she ends up suppressing the other’s subjectivity and thus loses sight of the other and in the second she ends up erasing herself in the other’s subjectivity and thus loses sight of herself. It may seem, therefore, that we actually are left with the Sartrean narrative in which one is always a subject looking at the other as object or an object in the world of another subject. But the central problem in *L’invitée* is not the simple existence of the other as indomitable but rather as inassimilable, as separate, and thus as a nagging reminder of the self’s finitude. Furthermore, through her motif of spectacle, Beauvoir shows that these ways of looking at the other are in fact artificial. In trying to see the other as a spectacle, Françoise is trying to drastically alter the self-other relation as it is – as one in which you can know the other, but you cannot know the other *in some pure way* – so that she will not have to face the fact that she is at
once separate from and connected to an other who is an essential consciousness like the self. Seeing the other as spectacle is Françoise’s attempt to use theater, as the art of finitude, to evade her finitude, and this attempt fails.

What Beauvoir’s novel suggests, therefore, is that the Sartre of L’être et le néant falls into Françoise’s solipsistic choice between perfect unity or a dramatic split. Denying the possibility of reciprocity (and of love as an authentic project), Sartre must deny the possibility that human beings could connect with someone on the level of a subject all the while maintaining a sense of that person as other, as alien to the self. Sartre’s philosophical stance in L’être et le néant twists real world relationships into the theatrical relationship that Françoise maintained between herself and others, into a relationship in which there is always a pure, infinite “regard” and an inessential, fictitious object. Sartre’s essay on theater then, takes on a new importance in this light. What he seems to be arguing is not that the relationship between a spectator and a performer looks nothing like the relationships one sees outside the theater; rather he is arguing that the relationship between a spectator and a performer freezes what is, in most non-theatrical situations, a dynamic relationship. What our reading of L’invitée shows us is that Sartre has theatricalized normal human relations, that this theatricalization involves a solipsistic picture of the human body and of the possibility of our connection to the other, that it is predicated on a false choice between complete unity or absolute separation. Sartre, it seems, has chosen absolute separation.
3. Ethics and Literature in Simone de Beauvoir’s Postwar Fiction: Differentiating between Existentialist Committed Literature and the Roman à Thèse

3.1 Introduction: Simone de Beauvoir’s Aesthetics during her “Moral Period”

In the course of Beauvoir’s “moral” period, which spanned the years of 1944-1947, she wrote two philosophical essays on ethics, Pyrrhus et Cinéas and Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, and various articles on philosophy, ethics, and politics for Les Temps Modernes. She also wrote two novels, Le sang des autres and Tous les hommes sont mortels, and one play, Les bouches inutiles. As with L’invitée, the critical reception of these last three works reflects the theoretical difficulties of engaging philosophy within a literary text, and many critics have seen her fictional works as concrete examples of the moral

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1 Pyrrhus et Cinéas and Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté first appeared in Les Temps Modernes as a series of articles. Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty founded Les Temps Modernes in 1945, and Beauvoir would act as its editor for much of her life.

2 There is an argument to be made for extending her moral period up to 1949 as Le deuxième sexe clearly dealt with questions about the ethical relationship between men and women. In fact, as I argue in chapter 4, Beauvoir’s ideal of empathy at the end of Le sang des autres directly founds her idea of a reciprocal relationship that is posited as an ideal at the end of Le deuxième sexe. If we do extend her moral period to 1949, it would also include L’Amérique au jour le jour, which is an autobiographical travelogue of her voyage across America in 1947. This literary work too contains ethical concerns, for Beauvoir devotes large swaths of her text to an analysis of race in the Jim Crow south and of women’s place in American culture. I have chosen 1947 as the end of her moral period because I see these later works as preserving her ethical focus but extending out beyond it as well. For Beauvoir’s most sustained discussion of race in this travelogue, see Simone de Beauvoir, L’Amérique au jour le jour (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 322-43. In other words, I see L’Amérique au jour le jour and Le deuxième sexe as incorporating Beauvoir’s ethical focus into texts that also have other concerns (conveying her subjective experience of America, getting clear on what racism is and why it matters, describing the philosophical assumptions underlying essentialist myths of womanhood, etc.) whereas with works like Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, ethics simply is the focus. Her fictional works before 1947 also have a more heavy-handed focus on her characters’ ethical decisions and dilemmas.
philosophy in her essays. Unlike with *L’invitée*, critics writing about these particular texts must also confront Beauvoir’s newfound concern with ethics both in philosophy and literature, and this added complexity in Beauvoir’s conception of the nature and purpose of literature results in a singularly mixed critical assessment of her work, one that demonstrates a particular discomfort with her ethical concerns. A study of her literary works of this period, therefore, adds a new dimension to the overall picture of what philosophical literature can do, for such a study can help elucidate how the literary form can contribute to ethics as a branch of philosophy.

As this study will show, new kinds of questions arise when a writer of philosophical-literary texts specifically hopes to contribute to ethical debates. What is the place of ethical thought within the literary work? Can a novelist write about morals without moralizing? Can she connect ethics and politics without becoming didactic or descending into mere propaganda? During her moral period, Beauvoir invites such questions as she works to incorporate ethical queries into her literary works. The focus of this chapter is thus how Beauvoir as a literary theorist and writer contributes to debates surrounding ethical philosophical literature.

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4 As Beauvoir believes that one’s ethical stance determines one’s political stance, politics and political decisions will be at stake here, but only when Beauvoir portrays them as an extension of the values espoused by her characters.

5 For the broader debate on literature and ethics, see *The Ethics in Literature*, eds. Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). See also my discussion of Nussbaum on pg 24. *The Ethics in Literature* includes a wonderful essay on Beauvoir’s *Le sang des autres*: 

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In order to decide what Beauvoir can tell us about literature and ethics, I will turn first to the critical reception of Beauvoir’s moral fiction. As the phrase “moral period” suggests, Beauvoir’s writing in 1944-1947 goes beyond how her characters live philosophy to ask what their philosophical reality tells us about how they can live ethically or authentically, about how they should live. For various reasons, critics have taken issue with Beauvoir’s postwar philosophical-literary project, claiming in essence that her new focus on ethics and politics turns her novels into inferior literary works, into romans à thèse (or in the case of Les bouches inutiles, into a pièce à thèse). This chapter will examine and question some of the literary assumptions underlying these rejections of novels with an ethical and ethico-political focus. In the end, I will show how Beauvoir’s concept of “committed literature” and her concept of literature as dévoilement, or unveiling human meaning in the world, allows for the fusion of philosophical ethics and fiction. For now, I will not address the question of whether or not Beauvoir’s literary works actually live up to her theoretical solution. Instead, this will be the focus

Terry Keefe, "Literature and Existentialist Ethics in Simone de Beauvoir’s "Moral Period"."


Ethico-political is the word I have chosen to convey Beauvoir’s concern with the ethical frameworks that underlie political decisions and affiliations. Beauvoir, I would argue, is not interested in the specifics of politics at this time. Except for a brief affiliation with Sartre’s “Socialisme et liberté” (an aborted attempt at a Resistance group), Beauvoir does not actively engage in politics, and she does not argue for or against specific political figures or political policies. Instead, she engages in ethical queries surrounding larger political movements. What false values underlie the ideologies of capitalism and the bourgeoisie or of authoritarian regimes and fascism? How can she formulate a system of values to support socialism or her anti-authoritarianism? Activism (feminist, socialist, etc.) and pronouncements on particular political policies (such as the French decision to remain in Algeria and their tactics while there) largely come later. One glaring exception to this is Beauvoir’s 1946 essay “Œil pour œil,” in which she argues against signing a petition to pardon the fascist writer, Robert Brasillach. Beauvoir, “Œil.”
of the next chapter, which examines Beauvoir’s portrayal of empathy as an existential and ethical problem in *Le sang des autres*.

### 3.2 The Problem with Ethics in Literature: Critical Divisions over *Le sang des autres*

If the critical reception of the fiction in Beauvoir’s moral period was, as I put it, singularly mixed, this was in large part because literary critics reacted differently to her work than critics who approached her fiction from a philosophical or political perspective. Whether or not critics praised or panned these works generally seems to depend upon whether they were evaluating Beauvoir’s literary talent, her philosophical ideas, or her political and ethical strategies. Beauvoir’s resistance to separating these aspects of her work from one another makes this critical reception even more muddled. Her characters’ ethical and political decisions, for example, rely heavily upon their philosophical beliefs about the nature of their world and their place in it. And Beauvoir herself argued in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* and “Idéalisme moral et réalisme politique” that political decisions simply were an extension of ethical decisions, that one’s politics reflected one’s ethical stance. At the same time, political actions created new ethical meanings in the world.⁷ In this way, critics who wanted to evaluate her

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⁷ See, for example, Beauvoir’s discussion of political decisions in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*: “le choix politique est un choix éthique” Beauvoir, *Pour une morale* 184. Her context for this discussion, as in *Le sang des autres*, is the Second World War. This idea is a more general theme in “Idéalisme moral et réalisme politique,” where Beauvoir discusses how human meaning or values underlie political decisions and how actual political decisions create moral meanings. For example, Beauvoir writes: “Alors la morale trouvera son vrai visage ; elle n’est pas autre chose que l’action elle-même, dans la mesure où cette action cherche à se justifier. . . . Et puisque le politique ne peut éviter de s’interroger sur la justification de ses actes, puisque une
novel for its ethics were necessarily drawn into the political decisions of her characters and vice versa. And yet, despite the complicated nature of the critical response to these works, the most adamant criticism of Beauvoir’s moral fiction came from literary-minded critics.

This is certainly the case for Beauvoir’s second novel, *Le sang des autres*, which is the first novel written during her moral period. In fact, *Le sang des autres* seems to be a perfect text for exploring questions of literature and ethics because, as Terry Keefe points out: “There can scarcely be a novel that deals more explicitly, more extensively, or more intensively with moral issues than *The Blood of Others*” (“Literature and Existentialist Ethics” 255). Indeed, the list of moral quandaries that Beauvoir’s protagonists must face in this novel are staggering, from questions about when violence is justified, to the meaning of abstention in politics, to the ethical difficulties of heterosexual love in a sexist society. Critical reactions to *Le sang des autres*, therefore, almost invariably address the extent to which a fictional work can or should engage morality, and critical reticence to accept the overwhelming moral content of *Le sang des autres*.

8 In this chapter and the next, the primary example of Beauvoir’s evolution toward ethics in her philosophical-literary work will be *Le sang des autres* although *Tous les hommes sont mortels* and *Les bouches inutiles* will sometimes serve as points of comparison.
autres reveals not only a distaste for Beauvoir’s handling of ethics in this specific novel but also a deep-seeded suspicion of ethical literature as a concept.

Of course, not all critics saw Beauvoir’s second novel in a negative light. For example, Beauvoir’s contemporaries praised Le sang des autres as a successful “Resistance novel,” and later critics, who were discovering Beauvoir’s long neglected philosophical contributions, saw this work as a step forward which would eventually lead to nuanced questions about the social Other in Le deuxième sexe. In both cases, critics pointed to Beauvoir’s newfound emphasis on solidarity as the crowning achievement of the novel.

From a literary standpoint, however, the novel did not fare as well. Although Le sang des autres certainly had its literary supporters, a common trend emerged in which literary critics either condemned the novel as a roman à thèse, or they discussed how the novel risks but ultimately avoids falling into this trap. In La part du feu, for example,

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10 These critics were not, it is worth pointing out, using the word solidarity in exactly the same sense. For those who were evaluating the political implications of the novel, the word meant the joining together of a group of individuals for a political cause whereas philosophical critics often meant an anti-solipsistic philosophy that saw human beings as inherently connected. For a discussion of these critics, see pp. 149-52 of chapter 4 of this dissertation.
Maurice Blanchot found that while *L’invitée* sustains the ambiguity necessary in a literary work, *Le sang des autres* ultimately asserts an unambiguous moral, and political imperative at the end. Famously – or infamously as the case may be – in *La Force de l’âge* Beauvoir agrees with Blanchot’s assessment, citing a lack of ambiguity throughout the book as one of its major flaws. She then goes on to criticize her play, *Les bouches inutiles*, on similar terms but claims that *Tous les hommes sont mortels* avoids an overarching thesis and thus works in ways that her two previous literary works had not.

Hence it seems that while *Le sang des autres* may have garnered her praise on a political or philosophical level, the novel has earned her a contested reputation among literary critics, including Beauvoir as a retrospective critic of her own work. In fact, the very aspects of the novel that garner Beauvoir praise from a philosophical, ethical, or political perspective seem to attract the pejorative label of *roman à thèse* in literary circles.

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12 Generally, Beauvoir is saying that the different subjective stories of *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (those of Régine and Fosca, etc.) do not converge to assert similar conclusions as the subjective stories of *Le sang des autres* (those of Jean, Hélène, Marcel, etc.) do. Although Beauvoir does not comment upon the difference between *Le sang des autres* and *Les bouches inutiles*, I distinguish between the two because Beauvoir’s novel allows for a subjective description of experience whereas her play, as a form, does not. In this way, although both suffer from the kind of convergence that Beauvoir condemns in *La Force de l’âge*, *Le sang des autres* in some sense escapes the faults of the *roman à thèse* through the ambiguity of the description of subjective experience in her individual scenes. *Les bouches inutiles* does not have this saving grace and thus remains, in my estimation, more open to the charge that is a *pièce à thèse*.

For example, Margaret Simons sees a positive philosophical evolution in Beauvoir’s turn to questions of responsibility and solidarity while Blanchot sees a literary devolution in Beauvoir’s oeuvre precisely because the structure of the novel’s ending unambiguously affirms redemption for its main characters through their discovery of solidarity. The critical division surrounding Le sang des autres thus makes sense when one considers the aims of the critics in question. Positive reviews generally came from philosophers and political theorists who would welcome a clear and strong argument whereas negative reviews came from literary theorists who see arguments in fiction as unsophisticated and contradictory to the literary enterprise.

Such an antinomy may seem familiar after previous readings of L’invitée. As with L’invitée, the critical reception of Le sang des autres points to a potential rift between the literary and the philosophical project, a rift that seems to leave the writer of the philosophical novel with a choice between creating a roman à thèse or delineating a concrete example of a more traditional philosophical text. In the last two chapters, I have shown that Beauvoir addressed this problem both in theory and in practice by shifting away from the concept of philosophy as argument and toward the concept of philosophy as ambiguous appeal. A recognition of her philosophical fiction as an appeal to the reader’s freedom should thus resolve any tension between the philosophical and the literary projects of Le sang des autres as well.
And yet, the critical reception of *Le sang des autres* suggests that Beauvoir muted the philosophical-literary appeal of her second novel and instead opted for a stronger philosophical argument. If there is one thing that nearly all critics of *Le sang des autres* seem to agree upon— from Simons to Blanchot and Beauvoir, Mahon to Scholz— it is that Beauvoir's novel *argues* for two new concepts: namely, solidarity and responsibility. In comparison to critics of *L’invitée*, who had to battle for years in order to prove that the novel made an original contribution to philosophy and who often contradicted each other as to the nature of Beauvoir’s philosophical contribution, critics of *Le sang des autres* seem to find Beauvoir’s argument for solidarity way too easily and unanimously. This relative ease and consensus, in fact, suggest that perhaps Beauvoir did not succeed in writing a successful philosophical-literary appeal with this novel and that, as Konrad Bieber writes, *Le sang des autres* represents a “regression” for Beauvoir’s fiction (159).

And yet, although the charge of *roman à thèse* often appears alongside allegations that Beauvoir’s novel is didactic and moralizing, it is not clear that Beauvoir’s turn to ethics necessarily drew these literary criticisms. Defining what these critics mean by the term *roman à thèse* helps to elucidate what in *Le sang des autres* provoked this negative trend in the reviews. As Susan Rubin Suleiman demonstrates in her *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, the term *roman à thèse* refers to a novel that presents an unambiguous, univocal argument with the intent of changing the reader’s worldview or way of acting in the world. Suleiman’s proposed definition of the
roman à thèse is thus the following: “[A] roman à thèse is a novel . . . which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine” (7). The roman à thèse hence has something to prove, usually in a realm outside of the literary such as politics, ethics, or philosophy, and this new “truth” that the novel asserts should change the author’s contemporary landscape through the novel’s effect on its audience.

Given these general characteristics of the roman à thèse, it becomes clear why literary critics would at least feel uncomfortable with the postwar change in Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary project. First of all, the French increasingly viewed existentialism as a doctrine, especially with the growing prestige of Sartre’s L’être et le néant, and this does not help the author of an existentialist novel to avoid the epithet of roman à thèse. One critic of Beauvoir’s play, Les bouches inutiles, for example, decries her tendency to put "dans la bouche des personnages les idées-clés qui lui sont chères.” He then goes on to explain that he would expect as much from Beauvoir “parce qu’il est notoire que

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14 In the original, this entire quotation was in italics to set it off from the rest of the text. While Suleiman’s definition includes the additional precision that the roman à thèse is a novel “written in the realistic mode,” she later clarifies that this was a theoretical choice on her part because of what she was trying to accomplish in her book. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 7. She envisions that others may look at the roman à thèse outside of the genre of realism, and this will be the goal of this paper, since Beauvoir does not have the same literary goals as 19th century realists Suleiman, Authoritarian Fictions 11-12. I have thus omitted this part of Suleiman’s definition since it does not further my particular project. It is also worth noting that while most literary critics would use the phrase roman à thèse as a pejorative term, Suleiman does not accept this value judgment outright.
Melle de Beauvoir vogue dans les sillages de[s] . . . philosophes existentialistes [qui] font de leurs œuvres le véhicule de leurs idées philosophiques.” (qtd. in Fleury 462).15

Second of all, the political subject matter of Le sang des autres may have attracted literary criticism. Le sang des autres tells the story of Jean and Hélène, who, for different reasons, abstain from political action as the Second World War takes shape around them and then, again for different reasons, decide that abstention is not an option and throw themselves into subversive Resistance activities. This overt celebration of the Resistance may have drawn praise from Beauvoir’s contemporaries, but later critics saw the ending as too neat, as too conspicuous in its rejection of abstention and its endorsement of violence, especially when Resistance members’ violent acts led to German reprisals against innocent hostages.16 While most literary critics may have agreed with the

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15The condescension toward Beauvoir as a woman and scholar is obvious in this quotation. Still, this critique is interesting because of its very obvious claim that, in writing Les bouches inutiles, Beauvoir is trying to convince her reader of the established existential doctrine of L'être et le néant. In fact, it shows that Beauvoir would have attracted this kind of charge more than her male counterparts simply due to the fact that many sexist critics of the time were not willing to consider the possibility that Beauvoir had written something original and not entirely dependent upon Sartre’s work or “doctrine.” I found this quotation in Danièle Fleury’s excellent article on the immediate critical reception of L’invitée and Les bouches inutiles in which she shows that changing attitudes toward existentialism as a philosophy could change how Beauvoir’s literary work was received. The original quote can be found in Antoine Goléa’s article in Fraternité, 7-11-1945.

16Donovan Miyasaki and Terry Keefe, for example, argue that Jean and Hélène have resolved the complex issues of guilt and responsibility too easily at the end. See Keefe, “Literature and Existentialist Ethics,” 259. Miyasaki recognizes that critics have painted a picture of the novel as a positive progression with a neat solution, but he claims that Beauvoir repudiates this solution as bad faith on the part of Jean and Hélène. At the end of the novel, Miyasaki argues, Jean feels absolved of all guilt both for sending Hélène on a deathly mission and for committing acts which resulted in German reprisals, and this absolution elides basic ambiguities of his condition that he was trying to evade during the entire novel. Most of Miyasaki’s arguments that Jean and Hélène are in bad faith at the end, however, come from comparing their actions with the moral precepts set out in Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté rather than from the ethos of the novel itself. If Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté argues that their absolution is in bad faith, Le sang des autres does not indicate that it is, and a different reading of the redemptive scene at the end shows the novel and the essay to be
antifascist political message of the book, they did not appreciate being beat over the head with it and thus characterized Beauvoir’s novel as crude and lacking in sufficient literary sophistication.

While these factors certainly contributed to the negative reviews of Le sang des autres, Suleiman’s definition of the roman à thèse suggests that Beauvoir’s decision to engage with ethical debates undoubtedly contributed as well. While Suleiman uses the word “religious” in her definition, we may expand this term to include all moral systems, even those built within an atheist/existentialist worldview like Beauvoir’s. Many critics indeed do highlight the religious underpinnings and undertones of Beauvoir’s ethics, and they cite the likely influence of her mother’s Catholicism on the writings of her moral period even if Beauvoir had long since stopped believing in God.17 Anne Whitmarsh, for example, writes: “[H]aving rejected the outward forms of [her childhood] religion, she retained the moral content”(46) . She then concludes that “Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialism may not be a religion, but it is a stern ethical system” (50).18 Hence Beauvoir’s incorporation of existentialist ethics into her novels and into her play would certainly raise red flags for the literary critic.

17 While we may acknowledge the influence of her mother’s Catholicism on Beauvoir’s ethics, it is important to note that existentialism, with its atheist, anti-essentialist starting point, must build an ethics that asserts values as a human creation.
18 See also Laurent Gagnebin, Simone de Beauvoir ou le refus de l’indifférence (Paris: Fischbacher, 1968).
Beauvoir’s ethical focus during her “moral” period may in fact have invited a stronger argument within those novels. Between *L’invitée* and *Le sang des autres* Beauvoir shifts from a description of her characters’ ambiguous lived philosophical reality to an inquiry into how her characters should live in difficult moral situations and particularly into how they should live in relation to others. This new focus, one could argue, either shuts down the possibility for the philosophical appeal or makes it more difficult. Ethics, after all, works to establish a theoretical means to distinguish between good and bad, between the right and the wrong actions, and this fact makes it more difficult for an author to write about such distinctions without offering prescriptions to the reader. Overcoming the potential rift between the philosophical and the literary project, in other words, could prove to be even more formidable when the philosophical project is ethical in nature.

All of this, of course, depends on the kind of ethics the writer would like to engage. As a branch of philosophy, ethics may attempt to describe the norms and value systems of different cultural groups (descriptive ethics), delineate a theoretical means to distinguish between right and wrong (normative ethics), point to ways to resolve moral problems in particular fields such as medicine or environmental studies (applied ethics), or study the signification of and grounds for ethical claims (meta-ethics) (http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/e9.htm#eth). If Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary aim were simply to engage descriptive ethics or applied ethics, then she could easily
continue to write philosophical-literary appeals. In this case, her novel’s complex and ambiguous description of the ethical situation would call out to the reader to make her own ethical judgment.

Beauvoir’s particular project during her moral period, however, seems more difficult to reconcile with the literary enterprise, for her existentialist ethics of the 1940s were decisively normative. From her essays it is clear that Beauvoir was searching for ways to make moral decisions that did not rely on pre-existing universal, external, and eternal truths, and yet she still wanted to combat the idea that existentialism amounted to nothing more than a bleak nihilism in which the ideas of “truth” or “values” made no sense. She still wanted to assert that in a world without God or absolutes the establishment of values was possible, and she wanted to participate in the founding of these values. Beauvoir writes:

\[\text{C}e\ n’\text{e}st\ n’\text{e}st\ l’\text{h}omme\ \text{i}m\text{p}ersonnel,\ \text{u}niversel,\ \text{qui\ est\ la\ source\ des relevantes} :\ \text{c’}\text{e\ s’}\text{t\ la\ pluralité\ des\ hommes\ concrets,\ singuliers,\ se\ projetant\ vers\ leurs\ fins\ propres\ à\ partir\ de\ situations\ dont\ la\ particularité\ est\ aussi\ radicale,\ aussi\ irréductible\ que\ la\ subjectivité\ elle-même. (Pour une morale 24)}\]

Existentialist values could arise only when separate human beings agreed upon a given signification for a particular reality, and these values could never apply to all}

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19 Countless critics have pointed to Beauvoir’s work on ethics as one of her principle original contributions to French existentialism. Sartre famously promised at the end of *L’être et le néant* that he would follow this work with an existentialist ethics. After writing thousands of draft pages, however, he gave up on the project. This unfinished work would be published posthumously as Jean-Paul Sartre, *Cahiers pour une morale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). For more on Beauvoir and existentialist ethics, see “Existentialist Ethics” in Sally J. Scholz, *On de Beauvoir*, Wadsworth Philosophers Ser. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000).
situations at all times. If such an ethics seems particularly well-suited to fiction because of its concern with singularity and the concrete, it basically remains a search for a theoretical means to distinguish between good and evil, or, if such terms are too religiously loaded for an existentialist essay, between the right/authentic act and the wrong/inauthentic one.\textsuperscript{20} Insomuch as Beauvoir answers these questions for her readers, she mutes her philosophical appeal and makes a philosophical argument. The question thus becomes whether or not Beauvoir could write a normative ethics about how one should live without telling her readers which ethical stances are good and which are bad, without telling her readers how to live.

3.3 Committed Literature: An Existentialist Solution to the Ethical Novel?

As I indicated in my introduction, one of the goals of this dissertation is to uncover the largely underappreciated richness of Beauvoir’s literary theory. It is only natural, therefore, to turn to Beauvoir’s aesthetic writings for potential theoretical solutions to the problem of ethics in literature. Within her moral period, however, Beauvoir never specifically addresses ethical literature nor does she indicate that she sees it as a problem. As the previous section has shown, if there is a problem, it emerges in the literary criticism of the “moral” fiction where the question comes up again and again.

\textsuperscript{20} The kinds of questions at stake in both *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* are always difficult to answer, and the same questions often return again and again. Do the ends justify the means? Does one have the right to suppress the freedom of an oppressor when he (or she) is suppressing others’ freedom? How do I decide which projects are worth undertaking? To what extent are the other’s problems my own?
again as to whether or not these works were à thèse. This does not mean, however, that her aesthetic writings – and, as we will see, those of Sartre – do not provide an answer to the question of whether Beauvoir’s turn to ethics doomed, or in the least stalled, the beautiful philosophical-literary project that she began with L’invitée.

In her evaluation of Le sang des autres, Elizabeth Fallaize points to a potential source of aesthetic writings that may elucidate Beauvoir’s position on the place of ethics in literature. First Fallaize recognizes the tendency to dismiss Le sang des autres for being too ideological or didactic, for being à thèse. Given the historical context, however, she believes Beauvoir could not have written Le sang des autres without necessarily putting forth a clear moral imperative, without necessarily writing a “committed work.” This small slippage in Fallaize’s language, from discussing the roman à thèse to discussing the existentialist concept of committed literature, is not lost on the reader or, for that matter, on Fallaize herself. In a footnote, Fallaize addresses this sudden shift in her terminology. “One may wonder what distinction it is possible to make between a roman à thèse and ‘committed’ literature,” she writes (Fallaize 65, footnote 10). While Fallaize goes on to outline a brief distinction between the roman à thèse and the committed novel – a distinction based on novels that validate or reject actions in specific situations (committed literature) as opposed to novels that propose general rules of action at all times (roman à thèse) – she does highlight the fact that the committed work and what
Suleiman calls the “authoritarian” work have enough in common that it is possible or tempting to slide between the two terms, to present them as equal.

Fallaize thus indicates that Beauvoir’s dedication to the existentialist concept of committed literature may be the reason why she suddenly came under fire for didacticism and moral propaganda in *Le sang des autres*, that there was something specific in the project of committed literature that courted the danger of devolving into a strong, dogmatic thesis. If this is true, then there are a wealth of aesthetic writings by Beauvoir and Sartre that could contribute to our understanding of Beauvoir’s stance on ethics in literature: namely, their essays on “la littérature engagée” or committed literature. As Fallaize suggests, these essays represent a larger literary trend after the Second World War in which writers considered words in literary works as powerful political, ethical, and social actions in their world.21 During the German occupation,

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writing Resistance novels meant publishing in secret with clandestine presses and risk¬ing deportation and death. Furthermore, denunciations and pro-Nazi propaganda by fascist writers like Robert Brasillach in his review Je suis partout led to countless lives lost. After this experience, French intellectuals and the French population in general tended to give more weight to the power of the literary word to the point where a military tribunal condemned Brasillach to death in the immediate aftermath of the war. He was executed on February 6, 1945 as part of the general purge of French collaborationists in the heady days of the Liberation. 22

Before moving on, however, it is first necessary to question Fallaize’s assumption that in writing Le sang des autres Beauvoir did in fact write a committed novel. Not all critics believe that she did. When Myrna Bell Rochester and Mary Lawrence Test define committed literature of the 1940s, for example, they question whether Beauvoir actually wrote in this tradition:

[T]he most effective fictional works of the time are those that skillfully combined the notions of “témoignage” – a testimonial of lived experience – and a “call to action” designed to educate and convince readers. If the stories are credible, and the characters indicate moral strength in their response, communication with the reader has been made without demagoguery. In light of these criteria, it is not clear that Beauvoir, for all her theorizing, actually produced committed fiction. (96)

Rochester and Test may have a point, and not only because Beauvoir could have theorized about committed literature without actually writing committed works. It was,

after all, Sartre and not Beauvoir who painstakingly elaborated a theory of “la littérature engagée” in his essay *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, and this essay was published in 1948, three years after the publication of *Le sang des autres*. Beauvoir barely mentions the concept in her aesthetic writings, and she does so in the 1960s, much later than Sartre’s first essay on the subject, when she defends it against its *nouveau roman* and *Tel Quel* critics in her contribution to “*Que peut la littérature?*” Even here, Beauvoir’s mention is brief, and she quickly says: “Je ne vais pas m’attarder sur la littérature engagée. On en a assez parlé” (“*Que peut la littérature?*” 87). Here, it is as if committed literature did not really interest Beauvoir, as if it were not really *her* territory to defend.

A closer look at the concept, however, will reveal that Sartre relied heavily upon several Beauvoirian aesthetic notions from “*Littérature et métaphysique*” when building his concept of “*la littérature engagée,*” and Beauvoir’s later writings echo some of the language of *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* while still shifting the focus to distinct Beauvoirian concerns. Furthermore, whether or not Beauvoir wrote her moral fiction with the intent to create committed literary works actually does not matter. What does matter is whether these theoretical writings apply to her moral fiction, whether they can act as useful theoretical tools in describing what Beauvoir’s novels and play of that period *mean* for the literary critic. Given the abundant moral content of *Le sang des autres*, I am going to argue that Beauvoir’s novel acts as, in her existentialist jargon, a *dévoilement* of ethical issues, that this *dévoilement* had the potential to change or in the
least challenge her reader’s ethical views. According to the existentialist conception of committed literature, therefore, this dévoilement of ethics makes her novel a committed novel.

What exactly did these postwar writers have in mind, however, when they talked about “committed literature” and the power of words? In his *The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values*, James Engell defines the committed work as literary writing that aims to tell its reader something about “politics, ethics, government, beliefs, law, education, national culture, and the spiritual life of the community” (4). This definition, however, may seem too far-reaching, for it is difficult to imagine too many works that do not in some way comment on one or all of these subjects. Proponents of committed literature, at least of the existentialist variety, in fact do see all literary works as having something to say about these aspects of human life. Their classic argument in support of this notion is that even aesthetic movements that attempt to cut art off from the world – for example modernism’s “art for art’s sake” – still make a political and ethical statement with their silence. In talking about art’s hermetic relationship with itself, Sartre or Beauvoir would argue, in not talking about politics or ethics, these modernist writers serve conservative, bourgeois interests because they implicitly uphold the status quo. In *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, for example, Sartre writes: “[L]e purisme esthétique ne fut qu’une brillante manœuvre défensive des bourgeois du siècle dernier, qui aimaient mieux se voir dénoncer comme phílistins que comme exploiteurs” (Qu’est-
ce que la littérature? 32). But writers like Beauvoir and Sartre see the committed novelist or essayist as recognizing the power of literature to act in realms outside of the literary and attempting to harness that power, to use it to improve their political, ethical, and social landscape. Theirs is a vision of literary language as utilitarian, communicative, and impactful, and in their novels, plays, autobiographies, and essays, they treat it as such.

With this preliminary definition in place, however, it begins to seem like proponents of committed literature may just be finding value in the much denigrated genre of the roman à thèse. The list of features that Engell provides to define committed literature, after all, does seem like an expanded version of the list of features that Suleiman provides to define her authoritarian fictions. And when one compares the list of authors in books about committed literature with Suleiman’s featured authors, there is more than a little overlap. For example, just between Authoritarian Fictions and David Schalk’s The Spectrum of Political Engagement, one finds that they have the following authors in common: Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Robert Brasillach, Sartre’s childhood friend, Paul Nizan, and even Sartre himself (although it is worth noting that Suleiman treats Sartre’s L’enfance d’un chef as a difficult, borderline case, as one that is not easily cast as a roman à thèse).23 Simply put, is one man’s - or woman’s - committed literary

23 Suleiman does not actually analyze Brasillach’s works as romans à thèse but instead mentions him as a potential candidate for such a study. Suleiman, Authoritarian Fictions 17. If Jean-Paul Sartre, “L’enfance d’un chef,” Le mur (Paris: Gallimard, 1939). is a borderline case, in Suleiman’s estimation, it is because Sartre
work just another’s *roman à thèse*? Or is there something in the committed project that *invites* but does not warrant this pejorative term? Studying the different iterations of the existentialist concept of committed literature will thus help us get clear on how existentialists like Beauvoir saw literature as engaging ethics without becoming, to borrow Suleiman’s phrase, authoritarian. Studying existentialist writings on committed literature, in other words, will help differentiate between the existentialist ideal of the ethical literary text and the moralizing *roman à thèse*.

### 3.4 Committed Literature as Dévoilement and Communication: From Beauvoir to Sartre and Back Again.

At least on a superficial level, the movement in the *roman à thèse* and in the committed novel would seem to be the same: in the case of the *roman à thèse*, we move from the demonstration of a truth within the novel to the production of a desired ideological change in the reader, while in the case of committed literature, we move from “unveiling” an existential truth to changing the way the reader sees herself in the world and thus the way she acts in or thinks about the world. This superficial resemblance, however, falls apart when one understands what the French existentialists mean by the verb “dévoiler” and how they see this unveiling as affecting change in the world.

writes with ironic distance from his (ultimately) fascist protagonist and thus parodies the genre of the *roman à thèse*. See Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions* 244-56.
The verb “to unveil” or “dévoiler” has its origins in Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of Being and Time. In an attempt to undo traditional Cartesian distinctions between the self (cogito) and the world, Heidegger created the concept of Dasein or Being-in-the-world. Any truth, according to this way of thinking, must emerge within an existential experience in the world; in other words, there is no pre-existing, objective truth. The way in which Heidegger imagined finding truth thus involved what he called “unveiling,” or a clearing away of that which obstructs our view.

Transported into French existentialist circles, the concept of “unveiling” took on a decidedly human dimension that Heidegger did not necessarily intend in Being and Time. Even the French term that Heidegger’s translator Henry Corbin chose for Dasein – “la réalité humaine” - indicates this subtle shift. As Eva Gothlin writes, this translation “later was criticized as being too anthropological” (Gothlin "Beauvoir with Heidegger" 48), and she points out: “In contrast to Heidegger, Beauvoir also explicitly refers to ‘man’ (homme) or ‘the subject,’ which means that her interpretation is clearly anthropological” ("Beauvoir with Heidegger" 48). Whether or not Beauvoir and the other French existentialists were correct in this interpretation is debatable and not within the scope of this chapter. What matters here is what French existentialists did with Heidegger’s concept, and when the French existentialists, including Beauvoir, talked about unveiling, they definitively meant a human action of bestowing meaning upon the contingent events and situation that they lived.
Proponents of committed literature distinguish themselves from the writer of the thesis novel through the difference between their project to “unveil” existential truth and the thesis novelist’s project to prove a pre-existing, universal truth. Unveiling in Beauvoir’s essays like Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté and Pyrrhus et Cinéas involves revealing how certain behaviors could look to a particular subjectivity; it reveals how one person could assign a particular meaning to others’ actions or to the world, and this meaning cannot stand in for universal truth because it emerges within the world, within that person’s situation. With this definition of unveiling in place, it starts to become clear how unveiling paves the way for Beauvoir and Sartre’s committed literature. Literature as dévoilement, in other words, allows for a place in which to assert normative ethics without writing an authoritarian fiction.

Although he was not the first to posit that literature was dévoilement – Beauvoir does so twice in “Littérature et métaphysique” as does Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his analysis of L’invitée entitled “Le roman et la métaphysique” - Sartre was the first to connect dévoilement to the idea that literature could constitute an action in the world, that a literary work could be engagée. In his 1948 essay, Qu’est-ce que la littérature?, in which


25 In the first instance Beauvoir writes: “Il faut tenter de... présenter [la réalité] dans son intégrité, telle qu’elle se dévoile dans la relation vivante qui est action et sentiment avant de se faire pensée” Beauvoir,
he popularizes and extensively defends the term “la littérature engagée,” Sartre offers two seemingly contradictory pictures of how literary works constitute ethical, political, and social acts in the world, both of which rely upon the concept of literature as an unveiling of human signification in the world.26 One follows the Sartrean ontological picture of being-for-others or “l’être-pour-autrui” in L’être et le néant while the other deviates dramatically from the tenets of Sartre’s founding philosophical text and points to the ways in which conversations with Beauvoir may have altered Sartre’s philosophical concept.

The first picture sees the literary work as a negative, aggressive, and destructive act, as opposition to the powers that be, to the dominant, oppressive ideologies of the bourgeoisie. As one would expect from the author of the section on the Look in L’être et le néant, therefore, this picture of literature as ethical act sees the literary text as entering into an ideological fray, ready to fight.27 Sartre writes:

[L’auteur] sait que les mots, comme dit Brice Parain, sont des “pistolets chargés.” S’il parle, il tire. Il peut se taire, mais puisqu’il a choisi de tirer,

"Littérature et métaphysique,” 81. In the second, she writes: “Honnêtement lu, honnêtement écrit, un roman métaphysique apporte un dévoilement de l’existence dont aucun autre mode d’expression ne saurait fournir l’équivalent” Beauvoir, "Littérature et métaphysique,” 84.

26 As David L. Schalk points out, Sartre did not coin this term or create the concept, despite a popular belief that he did. Sartre was “often erroneously viewed as the first to formulate the doctrine of engagement” even though he was clearly influenced by his childhood friend, Paul Nizan. Schalk writes: "The rather widely held opinion that Jean-Paul Sartre in What Is Literature? and other writings of the immediate postwar period initiated the discussion of engagement cannot be sustained.” See Schalk, Spectrum 9. Above and beyond Nizan, Schalk points to Catholics like Emmanuel Mounier and writers who responded to the Dreyfus Affair – most importantly Emile Zola – as engagés who preceded Sartre. The actual term came into being, according to Schalk, in 1932. Schalk, Spectrum 15.

27 Sartre’s theory of the Look paints a picture of intersubjective relations as inherently marked by conflict. See chapter 2, pp 66-68.
There is something undeniably macho in this portrayal of the literary text as a way of “being a man,” and the link here between literary engagement and engagement in armed military activity, like the Resistance or the communist/socialist Revolution, could not be more explicit.28

In the same breath – or at least in the same essay – Sartre imagines the literary work as a gift (“un don”) and as the height of human morality and generosity. He writes: “la lecture est un pacte de générosité entre l’auteur et le lecteur; chacun fait confiance à l’autre” (Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 62). As such, the experience of reading constitutes a true pleasure, a “joie esthétique” (Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 66), in which two human beings recognize and promote each other’s freedom. Here the overarching conflict that is supposed to underlie all human relations in L’être et le néant is markedly gone (as is the machismo, which was perhaps only there as a literary flourish). In this instance, the relationship between writer and reader seems not to be one of aggression but rather of the kind of love or friendship for which there seems to be no room in

28 There are numerous other examples of the explicit link between “littérature engagée” and Resistance activity in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? At the end of the section entitled “Pourquoi écris-on?,” Sartre writes that people must be free if literary writing is to have any sense and that at a certain point “la plume est contrainte de s’arrêter et il faut alors que l’écrivain prenne les armes.” Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 72. In this way, “la littérature vous jette dans la bataille; écrire c’est une certaine façon de vouloir la liberté; si vous avez commencé, de gré ou de force vous êtes engagé.” Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 72. This battle also emerges as part of the socialist Revolution, as in this passage: “En un mot, nous devons dans nos écrits militer en faveur de la liberté de la personne et de la révolution socialiste.” Sartre, Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 274, emphasis in the original.
Sartre’s 676 page tome. Even his discussion of “love” in *L'être et le néant*, for example, describes this seemingly positive relationship as an attempt to get the other to love you, as an attempt, in other words, to be a beloved object in the other’s eyes (*L'être et le néant* 404-19). According to this description of love, true generosity of the kind necessary for writing to be a “gift” simply does not exist.

It is almost as if Sartre has grafted another voice into his 1948 essay, one that pushes beyond the boundaries of his original philosophy of the early 1940s. Undoubtedly, this voice is a sign that Sartre’s philosophy does not remain fixed in what he wrote in *L'être et le néant* but rather evolves and shifts away from that text. It is also, most likely, a sign that Beauvoir convinced Sartre to include a concept of concrete freedom in his existentialism and that she convinced him to rethink *L'être et le néant’s* implication that reciprocal recognition was not possible. Sartre’s conception of literature as a gift or as generosity, in fact, relies upon the very Beauvoirian notion of literature as an appeal to the reader’s freedom. As in “Littérature et métaphysique,” meaning for Sartre in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* rests not only on the writer’s creation but also on the reader’s free, creative interpretation of the text. If there is no room for reciprocal recognition between two subjects in *L'être et le néant*, this is exactly what literature is for the Sartre of *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*; it is “un appel symétrique et inverse” (*Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* 58).
I would like to be careful here. I am not saying that Sartre was speaking with Beauvoir’s voice in the sections of *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* that speak of generosity between writer and reader. I am not saying that Sartre stole Beauvoir’s philosophy and tried to fit it into his own. Rather, I am saying that Sartre is speaking with a voice that has changed through his intellectual exchange with Beauvoir while still preserving something of his old voice. I am saying that an understanding of what Sartre has to say about committed literature must begin with an understanding of what Beauvoir has to say about philosophical literature in “Littérature et métaphysique,” with her concept of philosophical literature as an appeal. Sartre then pushes beyond Beauvoir’s essay to affirm that this concept of literature allows the literary work to promote substantial ethical, political, and social change. This is not something that Beauvoir says in “Littérature et métaphysique,” but her aesthetic theory makes it possible.

Sartre, in fact, does not write a schizophrenic text patched together from two personalities that do not fit with one another at all. Instead, he ties these two competing voices together through a concept of literature as *dévoilement*, as “unveiling” human reality in the world. Unveiling in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* implies that a truth had been hidden, either because of general bad faith or inattention, and thus literature has the power to reveal that truth, to pull back the veil that had been covering it over. In the first instance, this unveiling is an aggressive act leveled against the reader’s false ideologies, against his or her bad faith. Sartre writes:
Parler c’est agir : toute chose qu’on nomme n’est déjà plus tout à fait la même, elle a perdu son innocence. Si vous nommez la conduite d’un individu, vous la lui révélez : il se voit. Et comme vous la nommez, en même temps, à tous les autres, il se sait vu dans le moment qu’il se voit... Après cela comment voulez-vous qu’il agisse de la même manière ? Ou bien il persévérera dans sa conduite par obstination et en connaissance de cause, ou bien il l’abandonnera. (Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 27-28)

Hence, as Sartre notes in an interview discussing his committed work Réflexions sur la question juive, by unveiling the behavior of the anti-Semite, by showing how others view anti-Semitic beliefs, Sartre feels he is acting upon the world. The anti-Semite must face these unsavory aspects of his behavior, and those who interact with the anti-Semite may see him in a different, negative light as well. This kind of unveiling is, in other words, a literary incarnation of “the Look,” and it is in this way that Sartre sees words as “des pistolets chargés” (Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 29).

In the second instance, the writer unveils an aspect of the world as an appeal to the reader to take up the meaning of the literary work and, hopefully, reaffirm it and complete it:

Ainsi l’univers de l’écrivain ne se dévoilera dans toute sa profondeur qu’à l’examen, à l’admiration, à l’indignation du lecteur ; et l’amour généreux est serment de maintenant, et l’indignation généreuse est serment de changer, et l’admiration serment d’imiter ; bien que la littérature soit une chose et la morale une toute autre chose, au fond de l’impératif esthétique nous discernons l’impératif moral. Car puisque celui qui écrit reconnaît, par le fait même qu’il se donne la peine d’écrire, la liberté de ses lecteurs, et puisque celui qui lit, du seul fait qu’il ouvre le livre, reconnaît la liberté de l’écrivain, l’œuvre d’art, de quelque côté qu’on la prenne, est un acte de confiance dans la liberté des hommes. (Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 69)
For Sartre, this reaffirmation must emerge from the reader’s free creative interpretation of the text. If the writer tries to foist certain meanings upon his public, his work will fail, and thus putting the literary work out into the world constitutes “un acte de confiance dans la liberté des hommes” (Qu’est-ce que la littérature? 69) for the writer always risks that his or her truth will be rejected. For this reason, Sartre imagines writing as a kind of double unveiling, first by the writer and then by the reader, and in this instant Sartre’s conception of ethical literature turns into a conception of literature as an ethical act in which two consciousnesses recognize the freedom of the other.

In “Littérature et métaphysique,” Beauvoir had also conceived of literature as a dévoilement and as an appeal, but she did not characterize words as acts in the world. After Sartre’s Qu’est-ce que la littérature? she too shifts her understanding of literature such that the very act of unveiling, the very act of appealing to the freedom of the other through the literary text also has the potential to change the ethical, political, and social situation shared by writer and reader.29 For example, Beauvoir writes: “Pour moi, il [l’écriture] s’agit d’une activité exercée par des hommes, pour des hommes, en vue de leur dévoiler le monde, ce dévoilement étant une action.” (“Que peut la littérature?” 73).

When she takes up these concepts again in Que peut la littérature? and “Mon experience d’écrivain,” however, she does not simply repeat what Sartre said in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? but adds a unique focus on the ways in which literature preserves

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29 It is also worth noting that this shift could have come through her experience of writing Le deuxième sexe, which did actually transform how people understood the relation between the sexes and thus brought about real concrete change in the world.
the separation between two human beings all while creating a genuine connection
between them. This focus on connection, on the shared nature of speech, comes as a
response to the *nouveau roman* and *Tel Quel* critics of committed literature, who have
veered away from literature as communication of human experience and toward
literature as an expression of the obscurity of human experience, as *l’indicible*. At one
point in her speech, Beauvoir thus feels the need to stop and say what would seem like
common sense:

> Je pense qu’en ce moment nous communiquons ; je pense que je dis ce
que je dis et qui est ce que vous entendez ; il y a là un rapport vrai qui se
crée à travers le langage : celui-ci est opacité mais c’est aussi un véhicule
de signification commun à tous et accessible à tous. (Beauvoir "Que peut la littérature?”)(78)

While still admitting that “au cœur de cette communication il y a une séparation qui
reste irréductible” (Beauvoir "Que peut la littérature?”)(78), Beauvoir does not feel, as
her adversaries do, that such a separation renders all acts of language suspect or
impossible. She writes: “il y a communication dans cette séparation même.” (Beauvoir
"Que peut la littérature?”)(78).

As in *L’invitée*, Beauvoir indicates that the dream of pure communication or pure
communion with another – in this case with the reader – is not possible, and yet once
again she affirms that this should not shut conversation down altogether. For Beauvoir,
what truly makes the act of writing a literary work an ethical act is its potential to clear
the way for communication between two subjects that remain separate. As Toril Moi
indicates in her “What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist,” Beauvoir sees literature as having this power through its ability to absorb its reader in the subjective world of another without taking away the reader’s sense that this world is other, that it belongs to another. Beauvoir writes:

Et c’est ça le miracle de la littérature et qui la distingue de l’information : c’est qu’une vérité autre devient mienne sans cesser d’être autre.
J’abdique mon “je” en faveur de celui qui parle ; et pourtant je reste moi-même.
C’est une confusion sans cesse ébauchée, sans cesse défaite et c’est la seule forme de communication qui soit capable de me donner l’incommunicable, qui soit capable de me donner le goût d’une autre vie.
("Expérience" 82-83)

Moi sees this “goût d’une autre vie” that literature provides as Beauvoir’s way of reimagining identification between two human beings in which one does not “imagine or feel that one is the author” but rather that one “occup[ies] the same position (the same spatial coordinates, as it were) in relation to the world” ("Beauvoir as Literary Theorist” 193-94).

Once again in her aesthetic theory, Beauvoir steps out to defend the literary work, to delineate why literature occupies a privileged place for her, and why she sees it as valuable. Literature in this instance becomes a way to transform the shared situation in which individuals live out their particular lives. Beauvoir writes:

C’est ici que la littérature va trouver sa justification et son sens parce que ces situations ne sont pas fermés les unes sur les autres ; nous ne sommes pas des monades ; chaque situation est ouverte sur toutes les autres et elle est ouverte sur le monde qui n’est rien d’autre que le tournoiement de
This beautifully written description of literature holds the key to how Beauvoir believes the literary work can be *engagée* without being dogmatic, to how Beauvoir sees the literary work as engaging normative ethics without being moralizing. Ethics in this sense happens in the folds of these individual situations that envelope one another. It happens in the place where one situation opens out onto another.

By unveiling how a particular subjectivity, how a character, views certain moral quandaries, literature can assert strong, normative moral truths. At the same time, however, literature *must* highlight how that moral truth emerges within the imperfect world of a situated human being. In other words, literature unveils *human* morality; it unveils morality as fragile and human. If the reader validates what the author has unveiled, then writer and reader will have created a new kind of objectivity, the only kind available in an existentialist worldview. Sartre writes: “Écrire c’est faire appel au lecteur pour qu’il fasse passer à l’existence objective le dévoilement que j’ai entrepris par le moyen du langage” (*Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* 53). This is not some pre-existing ethical objectivity, but one that is forged between human beings, and the literary work has a privileged place in creating it.
4. Le sang des autres: Beauvoirian Mitsein and an Existential Account of Empathy

4.1 Introduction: From an Overwhelming Solidarity to the Solitude in Empathy

In their aesthetic essays, Beauvoir and Sartre have created a picture of the relationship between writer and reader as an ethical recognition of each other’s freedom. Such a conception paves the way for literature to be an ethical act, for in unveiling an ethical réalité humaine, the writer also works upon and changes shared, universal human meaning. For the Beauvoir of “Mon expérience d’écrivain,” literature loses that power when the author writes a roman à clef, a documentary novel (a novel written in Soviet Russia in which authors simply record what they see of workers’ lives), or a roman à thèse. In each instance, Beauvoir believes, the novel loses its power to transport its reader into the subjective world of another while still maintaining their status as other. In each instance, a problem emerges because the author does not attempt to portray subjective experience but rather objective truth.

Whereas Beauvoir denies that she wrote “romans à thèse” in “Mon expérience d’écrivain” ("Expérience" 447), this does not erase her condemnation of Le sang des autres in La Force de l’âge. As this self-criticism suggests, while Beauvoir may have provided a theoretical solution to the problem of ethics in literature, the question still remains as to whether Le sang des autres lives up to her existentialist aesthetic ideal. This chapter will thus turn to the novel itself with this question in mind.
An initial analysis on the level of plot will end up confirming what critics have been saying all along about *Le sang des autres*: through converging plotlines, the novel does, in fact, affirm solidarity as a positive moral goal for all characters and hence, by association, for Beauvoir’s reader. In turning to a largely unexplored moral problem in *Le sang des autres* – the problem of empathy – I will assert, however, that there is more to Beauvoir’s first committed literary work. While Beauvoir’s plotlines converge within the novel to affirm solidarity, plot is not the only way to evaluate a novel, and it is within the ethos of the individual scenes, where Beauvoir hashes out how her characters experience empathy, that Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary ambiguity flourishes. For Jean, the existential experience of empathy reveals (unveils) that his world is *Mitsein*, a Heideggerian term to describe how our Being-in-the-world is Being-with others, how our lives are necessarily inbricated in the lives of others. While this may sound like a philosophical word to describe solidarity, a closer look both at Heidegger and at Beauvoir shows that in fact *Mitsein* comprises a very complex, ambiguous picture of intersubjective relations in which we are at once separate and connected, *with* each other and existentially shut out from one another. An account of empathy as an ethical problem in *Le sang des autres* thus complicates the narrative of the novel as a *roman à thèse* and helps further elucidate the ways in which a novel can engage normative ethics without losing sight of itself as a literary text.
4.2 The Thesis of Solidarity: Allegorical Characters, Redemption, and the Convergence of Moral Plotlines in Le sang des autres

In *La Force de l’âge*, Beauvoir certainly believes that she made the mistake of forcing a univocal conclusion on her reader, one that perhaps belongs within the context of a philosophical essay rather than within a novel:

Blanchot ne range pas *L’invitée* parmi les romans à thèses, parce que la fin en demeure ouverte ; on ne saurait en tirer aucune leçon ; il classe, au contraire, dans cette catégorie *Le sang des autres* qui aboutit à une conclusion univoque réductible en maximes et en concepts. Je suis d’accord avec lui. Mais le défaut qu’il dénonce n’entache pas seulement les dernières pages du roman : d’un bout à l’autre, il lui est inhérent. (*Force de l’âge* 622)

It seems, therefore, that in Beauvoir’s eyes at least *Le sang des autres* does not adhere to the rigorous aesthetic ideals for the ethical novel that she and Sartre delineated after the war. Beauvoir does not say in *La Force de l’âge*, however, what “maxims” or “concepts” counter the novel’s ambiguity in her eyes. Are these maxims and concepts political, philosophical, ethical, or some combination of the three? Are they really as univocal and unambiguous as Beauvoir claims? From the last chapter, it would seem that critics have identified these “maxims” or “concepts” as affirming the positive moral value of solidarity. Even in this general consensus, however, determining what “lesson” Beauvoir’s novel supposedly foists upon the reader proves complicated, for these critics often did not mean quite the same thing when they used the word “solidarity.”

For some, solidarity was a political concept, and these critics thus used the word in its ordinary, everyday sense, meaning a joining together of human beings to work for
a common purpose. In talking about the depiction of war in Le sang des autres, for example, Mary Jean Green writes: “[A]ll of the novel’s heterogeneous characters move . . . from isolation to solidaristic participation in the Resistance” (Green 226), and she claims that “[t]he value embodied by Beauvoir’s female protagonist is that of solidarity” (226). Often, this solidarity marked the recognition by several members of an oppressed group that they shared common interests in combating their oppressors.¹

For others, solidarity was a philosophical concept, and they used the word in a more abstract or metaphysical sense, meaning a basic interconnectedness that characterizes all human relations. This metaphysical meaning of solidarity is usually part of an argument that Beauvoir avoids the traps of solipsism in the philosophy of her moral period. For example, citing the difference between L’invitée and Le sang des autres, Margaret Simons praised the post-1939 progression in Beauvoir’s philosophical thought away from questions of solipsism and toward questions of solidarity. While L’invitée “met en scène une solipsiste, Françoise, qui se voit d’abord comme conscience libre et désincarnée, niant l’existence d’autres consciences” (“Du solipsisme” 216), Simons

¹ As an example of such solidarity, Green cites a scene in Le sang des autres in which Hélène, who has been stranded outside Paris after the exodus, attempts to hitch a ride back to the city with a German officer. Green, “Writing War,” 228-29. When the officer attempts to stop Hélène because he already has too many people, a young woman on the truck grabs her by the hand and says “c’est ma sœur.” The officer thus allows Hélène to climb in, and the young woman, who did not know Hélène at all, has just created a bond between them in opposition to the occupier. Although she does not use the term “solidarity,” Eleanore Holveck also highlights the power of this line (“c’est ma sœur”) to “create family bonds by lived intentional actions and performative utterances.” Holveck, Philosophy of Lived Experience 100. In Holveck’s analysis, the women join together not only in opposition to the German forces that have invaded their country but also in opposition to men and their attempts to oppress women.
argues, *Le sang des autres* depicts a former solipsist, Hélène, who discovers “ses liens à l’autre et sa responsabilité à son égard” (“Du solipsisme” 217).²

Still, if critics saw *Le sang des autres* as succeeding on political or philosophical terms, they saw this success as arising out of Beauvoir’s characterization of intersubjective relations as solidarity or as being interconnected.³ Furthermore, critics depict solidarity as a positive moral discovery for Hélène, one that undoes her previous bad-faith position that the freedom of others (or their lack of freedom) does not concern her, and an examination of this positive moral discovery shows that the two senses of solidarity are not as separate as one may think. If Hélène decides to forge a link of solidarity with those who suffer under German fascist rule, such a decision comes from her realization that she is inherently connected to others in her world. The question then

² Other critics who admire *Le sang des autres* as part of a positive progression in Beauvoir’s philosophy all seem to point to this new social dimension of her thought and to her development of the concept of “responsibility.” See, for example, Hughes, *Le sang*, Holveck, *Philosophy of Lived Experience*, Scholz, *On de Beauvoir*.

³ Some critics even oscillate between the everyday and metaphysical meanings of solidarity, as Sally Sholz does. She first talks about solidarity as the opposite of solipsism, as a fundamental interconnectedness that characterizes all human relationships, before moving to a discussion of solidarity as the coming together of a political group such as women, blacks, Jews, or the proletariat. See Scholz, *On de Beauvoir*. Discussions of solidarity also abound in the reception of Simone de Beauvoir, *Les bouches inutiles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). This play, in which a medieval town under siege has decided to sacrifice its women, elderly, and children so that the town (read the able-bodied men) may survive, lends itself well to such questions. This is especially true because the townspeople decide to band together at the end and live or die together. Generally this critical discussion of solidarity extends beyond her fictional works to the moral essays as well. Simons thus cites not only *Le sang des autres* but also *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* before arguing that the concept of solidarity continues in the writing of *Le deuxième sexe*. Scholtz contrasts Sartre’s ethics with Beauvoir’s by saying that Beauvoir avoids the solipsistic traps that plague *L’être et le néant* and writes: “From the very beginning of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir addresses the question of solidarity, i.e., ‘How could men, originally separated, get together?’” Scholz, *On de Beauvoir* 32.
becomes, how does Beauvoir’s novel so unambiguously affirm the thesis of solidarity in both senses?

As a literary critic reviewing her own work in La Force de l’âge, Beauvoir suggests several answers to this question. In the second installment of her memoirs, Beauvoir says that Le sang des autres contradicts two of her literary ideals, and these ideals should be familiar to readers of “Littérature et métaphysique.” First, Beauvoir finds that the concrete does not ground the abstract in Le sang des autres but rather the abstract shapes her concrete characters and situations. This, in her opinion, detracts from the novel’s representation of reality, not in the Balzacian realist sense of presenting a mirror of some preexisting objective world but rather in her existentialist sense of human beings as a constant becoming in situation.4 This means that no one conforms exactly to a concept or an idea because people are not fixed like things but rather are constantly making themselves who they are through their actions. Furthermore a person’s actions, feelings, and beliefs arise out of (but are never determined by) her past, her social setting, and her historical moment. Hence, Beauvoir writes: “À le relire aujourd’hui, ce qui me frappe, c’est combien mes héros manquent d’épaisseur ; ils se définissent par des attitudes

4 Balzac’s realism consists in showing the ways in which people conform to certain types, and his characters thus end up bordering on the allegorical. In fact, in the preface to his “Comédie humaine,” he sums up his goal as follows: “En dressant l’inventaire des vices et des vertus, en rassemblant les principaux faits des passions, en peignant les caractères, en choisissant les événements principaux de la Société, en composant des types par la réunion des traits de plusieurs caractères homogènes, peut-être pouvais-je arriver à écrire l’histoire oubliée par tant d’historiens, celle des mœurs » (11). Honoré de Balzac, La comédie humaine, ed. Pierre Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). This means that in Balzac’s work he fluctuates between the character and the concept that the character is supposed to represent, between, for example, Gobseck and L’Usurier or L’Avare in Gobseck or between Adeline and La Vertu in La Cousine Bette. For Beauvoir, such a conflation of character and concept runs counter to her existential and thus her literary values.
moraless dont je n’ai pas cherché à saisir les racines vivantes” (Force de l’âge 622). She continues: “Le personnage, l’expérience que je lui prête sont des constructions abstraites, sans vérité” (Force de l’âge 623).

Second, Beauvoir finds that her novel does not encourage a multiplicity of meaning but rather leads its reader toward set interpretations or ideas. After discussing how two of her characters consider the same problems and come to the same realizations, Beauvoir concludes that such parallels are unfortunate. She writes:

[T]out converge au lieu de foisonner... De nouveau, je touche à l’épineux problème de la sincérité littéraire ; je voulais, je croyais parler directement au public, alors que j’avais installé en moi un vampire pathétique et prêcheur... On évite à coup sûr la banalité quand on livre sur le vif un moment de l’existence... mais le romancier y tombe fatalement dès qu’il spécule... ; on n’invente des idées ni dans les salons ni dans les romans. Une œuvre à thèse non seulement ne montre rien mais elle ne démontre jamais que des fadaises. (Force de l’âge 623-24)

In Beauvoir’s estimation, open problems lead to the same closed solutions in the lives of several of her characters, and these parallel stories with parallel conclusions reinforce the validity of certain ideas within Le sang des autres at the expense of others. Thus, the structure of the novel points to a single interpretation; the structure of the novel argues in a way that L’inivitée did not.

From one perspective, this negative auto-analysis rings true when one reads Le sang des autres. As Beauvoir points out, overwhelming guilt often seems to define her main character, Jean Blomart, and yet his guilt seems too acute to be based upon the personal circumstances that Beauvoir builds into the novel to explain it. Critics and
readers are then left scratching their heads as to why Jean feels these intense emotions. Genevieve Shepherd has even gone so far as to characterize Jean’s guilt as an “enigma,” and a “neurosis” (102) and these descriptive adjectives not only come out of her decidedly psychoanalytic perspective but also out of the lack of textual support that, based upon his experiences, Jean would be as consumed by guilt as he was.

Beauvoir also presents parallel stories in this novel where different characters – who, like Jean, could be said to represent different abstract moral attitudes - come to similar conclusions. Le sang des autres tells the story not only of Jean but also of Hélène Bertrand, and both end up joining the French Resistance after years of distancing themselves from the increasingly disturbing political events unfolding around them. They make this change in their lives through the painful discovery of their inescapable responsibility to those around them. Even in abstaining from action, Jean and Hélène realize, they become complicit in others’ suffering because they did not act to stop it.

Beauvoir thus seems to build a simple political thesis in her novel: in the face of oppression and totalitarianism, one should not take refuge in abstention and quietism. One cannot evade responsibility for historical inequity by standing to the side and doing nothing. For Jean and Hélène, action proves most effective when they join with others in a collective endeavor against the Third Reich. Hence, the novel does seem to argue for political solidarity.
And yet, as is to be expected given Beauvoir’s understanding of how ethics relates to politics, it does not seem that Beauvoir’s argument in *Le sang des autres* is simply political; rather deep ethical issues underlie Jean and Hélène’s decision to join the Resistance. The most pressing ethical issue is how to live with the fact that no matter what one does, whether one acts or not, one changes the course of others’ lives in unpredictable and sometimes disastrous ways. As Beauvoir’s epigraph from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* reads, “chacun est responsable de tout devant tous.” If Jean and Hélène represent different ethical attitudes in the novel, they each represent a different kind of bad faith response to this uncomfortable moral truth. Jean embodies the kind of ethical paralysis that can result from the sheer weight of this responsibility. He deludes himself into believing that if he does nothing, if he steps back from others and does not get involved in their lives, he can avoid being responsible for anything that happens to them. Hélène embodies an opposite compulsion because she denies that her actions have any effect in the lives of those around her or that their actions can really touch her. Believing herself to be pure freedom and purely separate from others, she ends up abstaining from political action not because guilt overwhelms her like Jean but because she feels no guilt whatsoever. At the end both recognize their ethical bad faith and undergo a conversion that allows them to take part in the Resistance. Their political convergence, in other words, is really an ethical convergence.
in which they agree that true ethical acts can only occur once they have recognized the truth of their unavoidable connection to others.

The overlap between the political and ethical storylines of two separate characters is further compounded by the fact that Jean and Hélène’s ethical conversion affects not only their relationship to society but also their individual relationship to each other. Unable to love each other authentically because of Hélène’s egotism and Jean’s paralyzing guilt, they end up embodying Beauvoir’s existential ideal of reciprocal recognition with each recognizing the other simultaneously as a subject and an object. Once again, Beauvoir affirms Jean and Hélène’s possibility for solidarity, this time with one another, and she thus creates another parallel plotline that converges to a similar conclusion.

Even the minor plotlines of the novel reinforce this overall need for human beings to recognize each other as necessary in their own free projects. In the story of Marcel, Jean’s artist friend, Beauvoir deals not only with the relationship of the individual to society and individual relations between the sexes but also with an artist’s relationship to his beholders. Marcel thus goes through a phase in his artistic development when he would like to create a work of art that stands on its own, that requires no beholder. It is almost as if recognizing the part that his beholder’s freedom has in making the meaning of his painting is too much for him. As he realizes that such a work of art is not possible, he in a sense tries to abstain from art altogether by not
creating any new work. By the end, he recognizes that his art will always need the beholder’s free interpretation for its meaning, and he begins to create works of art once more.

Within the context of the novel, the authentic recognition of one’s ties to the other resolves a myriad of complex ethical problems that plague different characters, and it calls for action in the political sphere, which necessarily means joining (read joining in solidarity with) certain political groups and causes. In this way too, Beauvoir’s parallel stories seem to argue for a kind of solidarity, although this is the further-reaching, anti-solipsistic solidarity that Margaret Simons discusses. It is not only a recognition of solidarity with other oppressed French citizens but with all human beings. It is a recognition that our lives are necessarily imbricated in the lives of others.

Because of these converging plotlines and their similar resolutions, one could see Beauvoir as forcing a univocal conclusion on the reader. This conclusion may, in fact, be politically and philosophically interesting, and it may contribute to existentialist ethics as a pertinent philosophical argument.5 As Terry Keefe asserts, however, it is this clear and tidy resolution at the end that bothers many literary critics:

[T]he moral issues, conflicts and dilemmas. . . are themselves. . . well brought out as problems lending themselves to no easy answers... . . . [I]t is because they are so well brought out that the alleged ‘solution’ to everything at the end of the book seems overneat and inadequate. (“Literature and Existentialist Ethics” 259, emphasis in the original)

5 Hence the positive political and philosophical reviews I mentioned in chapter 3.
Again and again, in fact, it is the redemptive nature of the end, the way in which it ties up all loose ends, that weakens the novel as a literary work in the eyes of its critics.

Hence, these parallel stories support critics’ notion that *Le sang des autres* champions solidarity, that it argues for solidarity as an objective moral norm. Susan Suleiman points to redundancy and to the positive evolution of a character as tactics used by the thesis novelist to argue for moral or political truths within the context of a literary work.6 Indeed, the redundant multiplication of similar subjective conversions implies that solidarity is a value existing outside of the experience of Beauvoir’s characters. This begs the question of whether or not Beauvoir chose the right form to posit her newfound existentialist ethics within the context of *Le sang des autres*.7 Did her subsequent philosophical essays, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* offer a better form in which she could express the ideas that she first tried to sketch within her novel? In order to perfectly illustrate how one should live, in other words, did Beauvoir end up stretching and twisting the literary form farther than it should have gone? Did she betray literature by trying to make it philosophy in the traditional sense of the word, and was this betrayal due to her search for an existentialist ethics?

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6 See Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions* 74-84 for her discussion of a character’s positive evolution and pp 149-98 for her discussion of redundancy.

7 Keefe asks this very question after the quotation above, and she then compares what Beauvoir does in *Le sang des autres* with her aesthetic values as outlined in “Littérature et métaphysique.” Keefe, ”Literature and Existentialist Ethics,” 255.
4.3 Problems with Empathy: The Countercurrent of Solitude in a Novel about Solidarity

If Beauvoir understands novels as unveiling human meaning to her readers rather than simply telling them what that meaning should be, then her novels should show the reader something that her essays do not. In many instances, through the richness of showing, she actually conveys meanings that do not appear within her essays. Of course, many of the themes and ethical questions of *Le sang des autres* do overlap with those found in Beauvoir’s essays, from *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* to *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and “Idéalisme moral et réalisme politique.” For example, her epigraph to the novel – “chacun est responsable de tout devant tous” – appears in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, and Beauvoir builds similar arguments about abstention from Dostoyevsky’s aphorism. Furthermore, some of her literary scenarios end up in the essays as short, phenomenological anecdotes. For example, the first part of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* begins with a scene that will prove pivotal in Jean’s development in *Le sang des autres* while in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* Beauvoir points to certain intellectuals who, like Hélène, chose to see World War II as the march of History and thus as something that did not concern them.

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8 Specifically Beauvoir writes: “La fatalité qui pèse sur autrui, c’est toujours nous... C’est en ce sens que Dostoïevski disait que ‘chacun est responsable de tout devant tous.’ Immobile ou agissant, nous pesons toujours sur la terre ; tout refus est choix, tout silence a une voix. Notre passivité même est voulue ; pour ne pas choisir, il faut encore choisir de ne pas choisir ; il est impossible d’échapper.” Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus* 283. The discussion of questions relating to this quotation starts on p. 282.

9 The scene in question in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Le sang des autres* is one in which a young boy confronts the death of a working class child. In the first case, his concierge’s child dies and in the second his maid’s child dies. For the example of intellectuals who were uninterested in History, see Beauvoir, *Pour une morale* 95-
While the philosophical-literary world of Le sang des autres shares many features with the ontology of the essays and while the structure of the novel argues for similar ethical conclusions as the essays, Beauvoir’s novel actually tells a different - and in some ways more complicated and ambiguous - story. Taking stock of this difference will involve shifting the critical discussion from solidarity to what I will call Beauvoirian Mitsein, which is Heidegger’s term to describe human reality as a “with-world” or a world lived with others. Beauvoir’s characters in Le sang des autres live in a with-world, and this with-world comprises not only solidarity but also separation, not only unity but also conflict. Furthermore, the novel reveals that living in Mitsein causes particular existential distress in moments of empathy, and the roots of this distress are complex, multiple, and not easily resolved. In other words, the novel allows for a philosophical account of empathy, of how human beings live and should live empathy. Not only is this account almost entirely lacking within the drier and more abstract philosophical

96. In Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté Beauvoir also discusses the moral choice that frames Le sang des autres: the difficulty involved in Resistance fighters’ decision to continue their activity in the face of German reprisals. Beauvoir, Pour une morale 186. “Idéalisme moral et réalisme politique” takes up political questions that have distinct moral import for Beauvoir and that emerge within her works of fiction. For example, she analyzes a medieval village’s decision not to sacrifice its women, children, and elderly to the cause of creating a free city, a scenario which lies at the heart of Les bouches inutiles and which occurs near the beginning of Tous les hommes sont mortels. Beauvoir, “Idéalisme moral,” 57-58. cf Simone de Beauvoir, Tous les hommes sont mortels (Paris: Gallimard, 1946) 125-28. She also cites Charles V’s decision to found a Catholic Empire through the Inquisition in her discussion of political ends and means, and Fosca not incidentally becomes Charles V’s advisor in Tous les hommes sont mortels. Beauvoir, “Idéalisme moral,” 46-47. cf Beauvoir, Tous les hommes 238-89.
writings, but it also adds a dimension of ethical sophistication to the novel that complicates the narrative of *Le sang des autres* as a *roman à thèse*.\(^{10}\)

The difference between the novel and the essays is readily apparent when one considers the scene that begins *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and the correlative scene in *Le sang des autres*. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* the scene is very short - short enough in fact, that it can be quoted here in its entirety:

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J’ai connu un enfant qui pleurait parce que le fils de sa concierge était mort; ses parents l’ont laissé pleurer, et puis ils se sont agacés. “Après tout ce petit garçon n’était pas ton frère.” L’enfant a essuyé ses larmes. Mais c’était là un enseignement dangereux. Inutile de pleurer sur un petit garçon étranger : Soit. Mais pourquoi pleurer sur son frère ? *(Pyrrhus 207)*
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This anecdote sets the stage for many of the philosophical preoccupations of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, including important questions about how one establishes ties with other human beings. Here empathy is at stake as a way to connect to the other, but the empathetic impulse is easily shaken, which leads to the muddling of the distinction between a stranger and the young boy’s (real or hypothetical?) brother.

The softening of this distinction proves unsatisfying because in a way Beauvoir over-philosophizes the situation, leaping to an abstract question that does not seem

\(^{10}\) In fact, I would argue that a tendency to take Beauvoir’s essays as the authoritative texts on her philosophy has helped create a serious critical silence on the question of empathy in *Le sang des autres*. It is in her novel that empathy becomes problematic, and while within her essays Beauvoir may evoke situations in which empathy matters, she does not explicitly point to empathy as a philosophical problem. Hence a tendency to look only to the essays as a source of philosophical insight and to the literary works as supporting material for those texts has buried Beauvoir’s very interesting philosophical contribution in this case. In other words, subordinating literature to philosophy has erased empathy as a philosophical and ethical problem for Beauvoir.
motivated by the actual anecdote. Of course a little boy would cry more over his brother than over a stranger, assuming that he has grown up with his brother. He knows his brother. His brother adds significantly to his life. This stranger’s death, on the other hand, does not change his life in the long run or even in the short run. In other words, Beauvoir’s opening problem feels, at least initially, like a false problem.

A few pages later, Beauvoir gives an indication as to why she wanted to include this question about the little boy’s brother. She writes:

C’est parce que ma subjectivité n’est pas inertie, repliement sur soi, séparation, mais au contraire mouvement vers l’autre, que la différence entre l’autre et moi s’abolit et que je peux appeler l’autre mien ; le lien qui m’unit à l’autre, moi seul peux le créer ; je le crée du fait que je ne suis pas une chose mais un projet de moi vers l’autre, une transcendance. (Pyrrhus 210)

Beauvoir’s intention here is to affirm an existential basis for empathetic feeling. I do not feel bonded to the other unless I create that bond, unless the way that I live creates that bond. Relating this statement to the opening anecdote, we can infer – but only infer because Beauvoir does not make the connection explicit - that Beauvoir asks why a little boy would cry over his brother because no pre-existing, essential, or biological bond requires the boy to empathize with someone else. There is nothing natural or innate about crying over one’s brother; the little boy and his brother would create their bond in living together, and this allows for a sharing of experience. Beauvoir affirms that acts or freely chosen projects and not biological brotherhood allow for the abolition of the separation between two subjects. This abolition sounds a lot like empathy in the way it
connects two people, but, as “un mouvement vers l’autre” and “un projet de moi vers l’autre,” empathy remains an abstract philosophical concept.\textsuperscript{11}

This brief sketch of a moment when empathy fails in Pyrrhus et Cinéas does not give a very strong philosophical picture of what empathy is for Beauvoir or why it may cause problems. The reader walks away with a vague sense that if she does not care about strangers, she risks enclosing herself in a deep metaphysical isolation that would affect even her relations to those closest to her. The way to correct this situation, as a “mouvement vers l’autre,” remains equally vague. Why, for example, does the little boy in question begin to cry at all upon hearing about the concierge’s son, and what would a “projet vers l’autre” look like?

In one of the only articles that discusses empathy in relation to Beauvoir’s philosophy, Judy Miles perceptively affirms that a strong philosophical account of empathy is necessary for reciprocal recognition, Beauvoir’s ideal for intersubjective relations. And yet, Miles argues, while Beauvoir posits reciprocity as the ideal heterosexual relation at the end of Le deuxième sexe, Beauvoir “does not describe in any

\textsuperscript{11} Just following the anecdote of the boy and the concierge’s son, Beauvoir moves to another situation in which one person can choose to care or not about the suffering of another. Again, the choice not to care about strangers brings with it the questioning of why one should care about those who are close to us. In this case, a husband would like to join a fight, and his wife tells him not to meddle in other people’s business. When afterward she complains about being tired and cold, however, he asks himself, “Sont-ce là mes affaires?” Beauvoir, Pyrrhus 207. With this brief sketch, Beauvoir reaffirms empathy as a philosophical problem. Our care for the other’s plight, it would seem, is rather tenuous as it is based upon our free will and our acts rather than familial bonds or duty.
great detail how such relationships come about” (182, emphasis in the original). Miles then turns to the work of Edith Stein and her philosophical analysis of empathy in order to fill in this void for Beauvoir since, according to Miles, Beauvoir did not provide such an analysis herself. This, however, may have been a hasty decision. While Pyrrhus et Cinéas does not deliver, so to speak, Le sang des autres does, and Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary rendering of empathy as an ethical concept will differ significantly from Stein’s.  

In many ways, one could argue that Le sang des autres is about empathy. In scene after scene, Beauvoir lingers on a moment when one of her protagonists – Jean or Hélène - observes someone in pain, tries to make sense of it, to figure out what it really means for the other and how it implicates the self. In fact, this contemplation of the other’s pain consumes the entire work, for Beauvoir frames Jean and Hélène’s stories within the context of a singular event: Jean’s long bedside vigil as Hélène lies dying. The flashbacks that slowly fill in Jean and Hélène’s background stories enumerate more instances of the suffering of others. Jean remembers visiting his grieving maid Louise

12 Obviously, Beauvoir posits reciprocity as a goal for all human relations, not just the heterosexual couple. And yet, as her analysis of the section on “La lesbienne” shows, Beauvoir seems to think that achieving reciprocity is easier between women in our patriarchal society than it is between men.

13 Miles summarizes Stein’s concept of empathy as one in which “[t]he way we gain access to another’s mind is by drawing analogies between our experience and theirs, imperfect though these analogies may be” (184). Miles continues: “Our experiences do not have to be identical to those of the one we empathize with. What is really at stake is recognizing that something is important to someone else, not that the same thing is important to oneself” (184). Compare these statements to the account of Beauvoirian empathy that follows. Most importantly, Miles asserts that “it is empathy which allows one to focus on the other as an other-subject” (184, emphasis in the original) whereas Beauvoir’s novel will indicate that it is the fact that one experiences oneself as an other-subject that allows authentic empathy to be possible.
after she has lost her baby, he remembers the day that police shot his young friend Jacques during a communist rally, and he remembers watching in horror as Hélène suffers the gruesome effects of a botched back-alley abortion. In Hélène’s initially egotistical world where she actively denies her ties to others, such scenes are not as common, and yet the turning point of her development comes when she watches the wrestling of a little girl named Ruth from her mother during one of the infamous round-ups of Jews in Occupied France. The suffering of others, symbolically represented by their blood, and the relation of this suffering to the “I” observer therefore constitute driving questions in this novel. In other words, Beauvoir returns again and again to moments in which empathy is at stake, and the novel’s ethical import turns upon how empathy is and should be lived.

Beauvoir’s account of empathy in the novel first emerges in a scene that mirrors the one in Pyrrhus et Cinéas. In this scene, a young Jean learns that Louise, who is his maid and nanny, has lost her baby to meningitis. Although the novel does not begin with this scene, as the first part of the essay does, it too has a foundational quality for the text because through this experience Jean discovers the paralyzing guilt that will haunt him until the final cathartic scene. As Elaine Marks puts it, the death of Louise’s baby “occupies a privileged place at the beginning of the novel and contains in miniature the

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14 Several critics have analyzed the importance of this scene, including Hughes, Le sang, 10-13, Elaine Marks, Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973) 32-44, Genevieve Shepherd, Simone de Beauvoir’s Fiction: A Psychoanalytic Rereading, Modern French Identities 19, ed. Peter Collier (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003) 106-09.
sense of the entire novel and its title” (Marks)(38). Longer than the anecdote in Pyrrhus et Cinéas, Jean’s experience provides a more extensive look at this moment of empathy and the existential problems it poses. Jean not only hears of the other child’s death, he sees it, for he and his mother go to visit Louise while the baby still lies dead in the room. Unlike the boy in the essay, Jean also knows Louise well for she watches after him every day. Above and beyond seeing the baby’s lifeless body, he must also deal with Louise’s patent grief, something we do not see with the nameless concierge of Pyrrhus et Cinéas.

Le sang des autres, however, is not simply an extended, more detailed version of what Beauvoir wrote in her essay. Philosophically and ethically speaking, the scene in Le sang des autres tells a different story, particularly when it comes to the separation between two human beings and to Jean’s freedom to forge his connections to others. As in the rest of the novel, empathy (or a lack of empathy) for those who suffer plays a pivotal role in this scene, and this empathy leads to a moment of solidarity between two characters, in this case Jean and Louise. As the little Jean watches Louise mourn her baby, he cries along with her, and at dinner afterward his impulse is to refuse to eat. Through the very structure of her sentences, Beauvoir creates a beautiful parallel between Jean and Louise: “Je ne pouvais pas manger. Là-bas, Louise pleurait, elle ne mangeais pas” (Le sang 16). When Jean finally does eat at the urging of his father, he

15 As Marks points out, this incident did not originate with Le sang des autres. It was in fact based upon an experience Beauvoir had as a child, and it occupies an important place in Beauvoir’s work as a whole, appearing a total of three times in three separate works. These include Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée, where Beauvoir first recounts the incident in her childhood, as well as Pyrrhus et Cinéas and Le sang des autres. cf. Beauvoir, Mémoires 182-83.
feels guilty for this action, a guilt that manifests itself in a nauseated feeling as the soup slides down his throat. Jean’s empathy not only shows a desire for connection with the other but also leads Jean to recognize his responsibility for the suffering of the other, thus reinforcing the sense that Beauvoir would like to highlight how human beings live in an interconnected world.

Even so, this scene – and others that follow it – indicates that Beauvoir’s novel and her picture of lived philosophy is not that simple. While critic after critic has offered Beauvoir’s concept of responsibility as proof of Beauvoir’s turn to solidarity, it is clearly the case that Jean feels responsible because of the ways in which his empathetic impulse fails. He does end up eating his soup while Louise cries, and later, when he tries to recapture his former sadness, he does not succeed. At this point, the perfect parallel between Louise’s life and Jean’s life is broken: “Il se forçait à contempler l’image : Louise assise au bord du lit, qui pleurait. Lui ne pleurait plus” (Le sang 18).

Instead of seeing her grief, he sees his apartment where his mother is hosting a party with her friends:

En vain. Ce n’est pas mon malheur. Ce n’est pas ma mort. Je ferme les yeux, je reste immobile, mais c’est de moi que je me souviens, et sa mort entre dans ma vie: moi, je n’entre pas dans sa mort... [D]ans mon lit j’ai pleuré jusqu’au sommeil à cause de cette chose qui avait coulé dans ma gorge avec le potage tiède, plus âcre que le remords : ma faute. La faute de sourire pendant que Louise pleurait, la faute de pleurer mes larmes et non les siennes. La faute d’être un autre. (Le sang 18, emphasis in the original)
The introduction of the concept of unavoidable guilt and the discovery of responsibility thus seem inextricably tied up with the discovery of separation rather than solidarity.\textsuperscript{16}

Jean’s “projet vers l’autre” or his movement toward Louise and her baby does not seem to abolish the gulf that separates them. Whereas in \textit{Pyrrhus et Cinéas} the father’s injunction introduces the idea of separation, in \textit{Le sang des autres} separation simply \textit{is}. In the midst of his mother’s party, Jean attempts to defy his father’s demand that he push his empathetic feelings aside, and if this attempt fails, it is not because his father told him to stop crying. Rather, it simply is true that he cannot sustain his grief indefinitely or even for as long as Louise suffers. As Beauvoir writes, this death is not his, both in the sense that he is not the dead child but also in the sense that it is Louise’s grief to live; her son’s death is \textit{hers}; she owns it in a way that Jean never could.

The problem in this founding scene, as in the founding scene of the old jacket in \textit{L’invitée}, is thus the unavoidable fact of human finitude. What Jean discovers here is “the absolute separation between consciousnesses, the gulf between any ‘I’ and other people, the essential human solitude and the moral problem it poses in the domain of action: the problem of responsibility” (Marks 40). A desire to get beyond this separation and an inability to do so fuel many of the moments of anguish in this existential novel just as they did in \textit{L’invitée}. Even as Jean remembers the death of Louise’s baby, for

\textsuperscript{16} Although Mary Jean Green does not discuss solitude in \textit{Le sang des autres}, she does point out that this concern dominates Beauvoir’s Simone de Beauvoir, \textit{Journal de guerre : septembre 1939-janvier 1941}, ed. Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), while Beauvoir remains largely silent about solidarity.
example, he evokes other moments of suffering for which he feels responsible, and an irremediable separation plays a key role in these moments as well:

À part tout, c’est son malheur et non le nôtre. C’est sa mort. Ils l’avaient couché sur le banc avec son col déchiré et ce sang caillé sur son visage ; son sang, pas le mien. « Je n’oublierai jamais. »... Et sa mort est au fond de nos vies, paisible et étrangère, et nous, vivants, nous nous rappelons ; nous vivons de nous la rappeler alors qu’elle n’existe plus, qu’elle n’a jamais existé pour lui qui est mort. Pas toute notre vie. Pas même quelques jours. Pas même une minute. Tu es seule sur ce lit, et moi je ne peux qu’entendre ce râle qui sort de tes lèvres et que tu n’entends pas. (Le sang 17, emphasis in the original)

At first, this moment jars and confuses the reader, for she does not know that Jean has begun to talk about someone other than Louise’s baby nor does she know who Jean is addressing with his sudden “tu.” Only in reading further does it become clear that Jean is remembering first Jacques dead in the midst of the communist rally and then is returning to the present to think about Hélène, who lies on the bed in front of him.

From a formal point of view, Beauvoir highlights the emotional intensity of these experiences as they compound themselves on top of the memory of Louise’s baby by writing Jean’s thoughts in italics. And once again, Beauvoir’s emphasis is on the lack of a parallel between Jean and the one who suffers. With Jacques, this lack of parallel comes out in the repeated words “mort” and “vie” or “vivants” while with Hélène it comes through in what they hear or do not hear. Jean hears the death rattle that comes from Hélène’s lips while she remains stuck in unconsciousness, unable to hear. In all instances for Jean, the desire is to establish the parallel, to abolish alterity.
This moment, in which Jean listens to Hélène’s moaning while she lies unconscious, acts as a precursor to another moment in which Beauvoir gives new meaning to her title *Le sang des autres*. This time it is Hélène who hears and Jean who does not. As Hélène agonizes on her deathbed, she hears a buzzing in her head, but she believes that the sound is coming from somewhere in the apartment above her:

> Elle reste un moment aux aguets, elle écoute; elle n’écoute pas dehors, mais au-dedans d’elle.
> - Ils font toujours ce bruit là-haut, tu entends ?
> Il n’entend pas ; il se penche avidement sur cette agonie, mais il ne peut pas la partager. (*Le sang* 70)

Jean agonizes here alongside Hélène, but he does not agonize in the same way she does. She is agonizing because she is dying, and he is agonizing because he cannot feel her death, because he cannot live it from the inside. No matter how closely he leans in to Hélène, he cannot hear that noise inside her head; it is in her internal world, not his. He is shut out just as he is shut out from her pain and her death. There is a desperate need to break this solitude, to break through and hear what that sound is for himself. Is it the delusion of a mind that is starting to go and thus creates the illusion of people talking and laughing in the apartment above? Is it part of a dream and thus the incoherent babble of a person who is not quite awake but not quite asleep? Tellingly, he imagines that Hélène hears the white sound of her blood rushing through her head, explicitly linking this idea of separation to Beauvoir’s theme of the blood of others. Invariably,
suffering and empathy lead to a frustrating sense of separation and to guilt at not being able to abolish that separation.

### 4.4 Ambiguous Ethics: From Solidarity to Beauvoirian Mitsein

Given this portrayal of empathy in the novel, it seems that the term “solidarity” does not quite convey Beauvoir’s picture of intersubjective relations in *Le sang des autres*. In order to give a fuller account of the self-other relation in *Le sang des autres*, a new term will be needed, one that comprises the solidarity that is undoubtedly there while still allowing for the intense moments of separation that recur throughout the text.

Heidegger’s philosophy in *Being and Time* provides such a term in *Mitsein*, which affirms conflict and separation in a world of interconnected beings. If Beauvoir builds a literary world that looks like *Mitsein*, however, she does so within the context of French existentialism, which, unlike the philosophy of *Being and Time*, is unabashedly a philosophy of the subject. Furthermore, she includes distinctly normative ethical inquiries into how one should live within *Mitsein*, inquiries that were not part of Heidegger’s project. Heidegger’s thought thus acts as a springboard for resolving apparent contradictions in Beauvoir’s account of empathy and for delving into the ambiguous ethics of her novel.

These contradictions lie right on the surface of the scene in which Louise’s baby dies. If we were simply absolutely separate beings and we could never bridge the gulf that rises up between us, then in what context could we speak of responsibility, for
responsibility seems to imply an overwhelming connection to others? Konrad Bieber, for example, describes responsibility in the following terms: “Watching Hélène draw close to her end, he [Jean] discovers that each existant is responsible for others just as for himself, that he is tied inextricably to the world and to others no matter what he does” (160). What the scene in Le sang des autres leads us to ask, then, is how does the young Jean, who has just experienced the irrevocable separation between himself and two other beings (Louise and her baby), arrive at the conclusion that he is too connected to others, that this connection implies an overwhelming guilt, and that he must actively work to separate himself from those around him if he is to cleanse his guilty conscience? In other words, how can Beauvoir simultaneously affirm unavoidable separation and unavoidable connection as if they were related to one another?

To my knowledge, no critic has ever discussed Le sang des autres in relation to Heidegger’s Mitsein, and a superficial reading of the concept does not suggest that it will solve the solidarity versus separation problem. In Heidegger’s philosophy, human beings start not with separation but with connection, with Mitsein or “Being-with” which permeates all aspects of relations between the self and the other. Every human being is inextricably with other human beings in the world; no one lives a completely isolated or autonomous existence defined only by the self. This is a distinctly anti-Cartesian point of view in which radical solipsism is simply impossible, and Heidegger

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17 Donovan Miyasaki briefly cites Heidegger in his discussion of Le sang des autres but only to state that Beauvoir, like Heidegger and in contradistinction to Sartre, took a person’s concrete possibilities into account when discussing freedom. See Miyasaki, “Violence Politique,” 409-10.
dismisses the idea that the “I” would face some kind of insurmountable obstacle or border that blocks access the alien other.\footnote{As Lundgren-Gothlin suggests, Heidegger’s stance may not even be anti-Cartesian for Heidegger does not set out to “solve the problem of solipsism”; rather Mitsein steps around the problem altogether “by choosing a rather different point of departure.” Lundgren-Gothlin, \textit{Sex and Existence} 216.} He writes:

> To avoid this misunderstanding we must notice in what sense we are talking about “the Others.” By “Others” we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too. (154, emphasis in the original)

It is this recognition of others as being my fellows, as being fundamentally like me that brings with it the fact that our world is Mitsein, in Heidegger’s estimation. “By reason of this \textit{with-like} Being-in-the-world,” Heidegger writes, “the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a \textit{with-world} . . . Being-in is \textit{Being-with} Others” (155, emphasis in the original). If I cannot isolate myself from others, I am \textit{with} them: this is an indisputable truth of my existence.

After this initial description, however, Mitsein may sound like nothing more than Heidegger’s fancy philosophical word for solidarity, and using the term would not contribute to critical debate about the ethical import of \textit{Le sang des autres}. As Nancy Bauer has pointed out, readers of Heidegger have in fact often misunderstood Mitsein in this way. They see Mitsein as a naïve humanism that asserts a vague, unsubstantiated solidarity and leaves no room for conflict: we are all \textit{with} each other, we are all like each
other, and so we should all treat each other with respect.\footnote{It is because of this reading of Heidegger that critics have seen Beauvoir’s appropriation of Heideggerian philosophy in her writings as being at odds with her appropriation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in which the encounter with the other immediately engenders conflict.} Adding to this seemingly positive picture of how human beings encounter one another in the world, Heidegger sprinkles his discussion of \textit{Mitsein} in \textit{Being and Time} with words such as “solicitude” (157), “care” (157), “concern” (157), and, not incidentally, “empathy” (162). All of these words deceptively hint at a universal solidarity based upon the fact that we are all human beings.

Even seasoned philosophers like Sartre have ascribed to such a reading of \textit{Mitsein}. In \textit{L'être et le néant}, Sartre conceives of \textit{Mitsein} as an overly cheerful or moralistic notion in which every person shares a common aim or common goals with others. Equating \textit{Mitsein} with “une sorte de solidarité ontologique” (\textit{L'être et le néant} 284), Sartre finds such a conception unpalatable largely due to his emphasis on conflict. For Sartre, Heidegger presents an ontology in which “[n]otre relation n’est pas une opposition \textit{de front}, c’est plutôt une interdépendance \textit{par côté}” (\textit{L'être et le néant} 284, emphasis in the original). Only a few paragraphs later Sartre again criticizes what he sees as Heidegger’s unrealistic stance that simply disregards the fact of conflict in the world: “L’image empirique qui symboliserait le mieux l’intuition heideggérienne n’est pas celle de la lutte, c’est celle de l’équipe” (\textit{L'être et le néant} 285, emphasis in the original).

Thus, in keeping with his ontological beliefs, Sartre unequivocally rejects the concept of \textit{Mitsein}. 

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\footnote{It is because of this reading of Heidegger that critics have seen Beauvoir’s appropriation of Heideggerian philosophy in her writings as being at odds with her appropriation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in which the encounter with the other immediately engenders conflict.}
If *Mitsein* simply meant solidarity, however, it is not certain that Beauvoir would have accepted it as the universal ontological description that Heidegger meant it to be, and a *Mitsein*-like world in *Le sang des autres* would therefore seem unlikely. In her philosophical essays, Beauvoir usually uses the term solidarity in its everyday, political sense, and she discourages extending the meaning of the word beyond the parameters of the everyday such that it becomes an abstract concept that applies to all human beings. She discourages, in other words, a subliming of the word to the point where it is emptied of all real meaning. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, for example, Beauvoir dismisses the idea that one could work for all of humanity, that one could imagine humanity as Humanity, as a block with common interests:

> Pour que nous puissions agir pour l’humanité il faut qu’elle réclame quelque chose de nous; il faut qu’elle possède une unité en tant que totalité qui cherche à se réaliser, et qu’elle nous appelle d’une seule voix. C’est dans le mythe de la solidarité que l’humanité prend cette figure. (Pyrrhus 293, emphasis added)

Instead, Beauvoir argues, the word solidarity only has meaning in the context of a specific group of human beings who *forge* their connection to others rather than passively accepting it. “[D]es solidarités se créent,” she writes. “[M]ais un homme ne peut se faire solidaire de tous les autres, car ils ne choisissent pas tous les mêmes buts puisque leurs choix sont libres” (*Pyrrhus* 241-42). If one cannot conceive of an overarching solidarity with all mankind, this is because “[o]n travaillera toujours pour certains hommes contre d’autres” (*Pyrrhus* 242).
In this way, Mitsein would only account for part of Beauvoir’s philosophical picture in her novel Le sang des autres. Of course, such a definition of Mitsein would suggest an affinity between Heidegger’s philosophy and Beauvoir’s narrative of separated, uncommitted characters who join the Resistance, and Mitsein as philosophical solidarity would also resonate with readings of Le sang des autres as anti-solipsistic in its focus on how characters live in an interconnected world. And yet, with Sartre’s definition of Mitsein there is no way to account for the intense moments of separation in Le sang des autres, and Sartre’s rendering of Mitsein as a positive ethical concept does not encompass the intense anguish that plagues Jean as he tries to break free of his entanglement with others.

In insisting on talking about Beauvoirian Mitsein rather than talking about solidarity, however, I am not simply replacing a non-philosophical word with its philosophical homonym, for the common reading of Mitsein as solidarity is actually a common misreading. Mitsein is neither inherently positive nor is it inherently ethical (although, as I will argue later, it has a latent potential to be, a potential that Beauvoir will capitalize upon in her novel and in later writings such as Le deuxième sexe). It is not

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20 Nancy Bauer, “Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology,” The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2006). and, Gothlin, “Beauvoir with Heidegger.” repeatedly assert this reading of Mitsein as an ontological description rather than an ethical concept. Bauer, for example, writes: “[T]hough the notion of Mitsein may turn out... to have broadly ethical ramifications, its main function in both Being and Time and on Beauvoir’s reading of that book is not to exalt some notion of human community but rather to further Heidegger’s central project of laying out a challenge to the Cartesian epistemological tradition and its threat of solipsism.” Bauer, “Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology,” 67. Gothlin echoes Bauer’s argument when she writes that “Mitsein is... not in itself an ethical concept” but that one could draw ethical implications from it. Gothlin, “Beauvoir with Heidegger,” 62. If I
only about solidarity and fellowship but rather about a shared, public nature of the self, about the ways in which we write ourselves onto others and others write themselves onto us. Because our world is made up of others who use the same language and tools we use, we cannot define ourselves or our world without reference to them. In explaining this concept, Nancy Bauer gives the example of a hammer: “It is part of what it means to be a hammer. . . that it is something that people (and not just I) use. The existence. . . of a hammer, then, entails the existence. . . of other people” ("Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology" 73). For Heidegger, even when one is alone, one is still a part of Mitsein for our concept of “being alone” would make no sense without others who could be - but are not – there (156-57).

Such a non-normative understanding of Mitsein paves the way for separation and conflict and for Mitsein to have nefarious effects in people’s lives. In fact, Heidegger envisioned negative or what he called “inauthentic” ways of assuming one’s place in Mitsein. After claiming that one’s relation to others is one of “solicitude,” Heidegger maintains that this solicitude can express itself in what he calls its “deficient” or “Indifferent modes”:

say that Mitsein has a latent potential to be an ethical concept, it is because other philosophers, like Beauvoir, could take this concept up and elaborate an ethics based upon the fact that we are ontologically with one another. For example, Frederick A. Olafson, Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein, Modern European philosophy, ed. Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). has written an entire book in which he looks to Mitsein as a gateway to elaborating an existentialist ethics. Not uncharacteristically for a philosophical scholar, he puts Heidegger in conversation with Sartre and with Merleau-Ponty but not with Beauvoir.
Being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not “mattering” to one another – these are possible ways of solicitude. And it is precisely these last-named deficient and Indifferent modes that characterize everyday, average Being-with-one-another. (158)

Thus Mitsein allows for discord just as much as it allows for harmony, anguish just as much as happiness, and indifference just as much as care. Beyond these “deficient modes,” Heidegger also describes a not-so-happy picture of the possibility that a person could lose herself in the current of Mitsein, that she could “surrender[. . .]” (166) herself to its commonalities, accept its conventions as her own identity, and lose her individuality to what Heidegger calls “das Man,” a term that translates into English as “the they” (Heidegger 164).21 None of these inauthentic or deficient modes of Mitsein figure as an exception in an overall harmonious picture, and their inclusion in Heidegger’s ontology would seem to invalidate readings of Mitsein as a sociable team of human beings working together for the common good.

With this reading of Mitsein, it seems more likely that Beauvoir would create a philosophical-literary world in which Mitsein simply is, as Bauer puts it, an “ontological fact” (“Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology” 75). In this case, Beauvoir’s essays do support the sense that Mitsein as a concept fits into her overall philosophical views. Unlike Sartre, Beauvoir does not reject Heidegger’s Mitsein but rather uses it in Le deuxième sexe, and there is only one instance in which she could possibly be using the

21 I like to think of this concept as trying to pin down “the they” in such sentences as “they say we shouldn’t wear white after Labor Day.” This “they” is a collective, shared, cultural voice that is everyone and no one at the same time.
term in order to stand in opposition to it. When Beauvoir first mentions *Mitsein* in *Le deuxième sexe*, she seems to evoke Sartre’s understanding by lifting his terminology directly from *L’être et le néant*. After admitting that there is conflict in the world, she writes, “Ces phénomènes ne sauraient se comprendre si la réalité humaine était exclusivement un *mitsein* basé sur la solidarité et l’amitié” (*Deuxième sexe* I:17). While one could read this as towing the Sartrean line and rejecting *Mitsein* as an overly optimistic philosophical view, Bauer and Gothlin offer a more interesting interpretation of what Beauvoir is saying here. By parroting Sartre’s words, they argue, Beauvoir tacitly references him and rejects his conception of *Mitsein* as incomplete. Whereas Sartre sees *Mitsein* as a philosophy of *l’équipe*, Beauvoir seems to be saying that *Mitsein* represents something *more than* solidarity, *more than* a team of human beings working together for a common goal.

Beauvoir’s use of the term *Mitsein* in the rest of her writings supports such an interpretation of this line. Beauvoir may only use the word *Mitsein* seven times in over one thousand pages in *Le deuxième sexe* (Lundgren-Gothlin 220), and yet “in none of these instances does Beauvoir suggest that *Mitsein* has some obviously positive or normative value” (Bauer "Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology" 81). Gothlin turns to the following citation in *Le deuxième sexe* for her proof that Beauvoir envisions a *Mitsein* that allows for real strife and conflict: “C’est au sein d’un *mitsein* originel que leur opposition [celle entre l’homme et la femme] s’est dessinée et elle ne l’a pas brisée” (Beauvoir
Deuxième sexe I:19). Thus since the conflict that opposes men to women arose not outside of or against Mitsein but in its midst, Gothlin confidently asserts: “For Beauvoir, humans are Mitsein, but this Mitsein can be lived either in separation and conflict or in friendship and solidarity” (“Beauvoir with Heidegger” 58). Building upon Heidegger’s assertion that being alone is still being-with, even the concepts of separation and conflict rely upon the existence of others for their very meaning. Separation and conflict do not disprove Mitsein; rather, separation and conflict can only exist, they can only make sense as part of a being-with, as one of the ways that human beings live their existence with others.  

This nuanced reading of Heidegger’s Mitsein galvanizes our understanding of what is happening in Le sang des autres. First of all, Beauvoir’s novel demonstrates again and again that her characters live in a “with-world.” Jean’s case in particular

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22 On Gothlin’s reading, Beauvoir also recognizes the potential dangers of the permeability of the subject in a world that is characterized by Mitsein, and this recognition paves the way for some of her most profound insights in Le deuxième sexe. In fact, a woman’s particular way of giving into das Man, or “the they” is to take on ready-made notions about what a woman is and accept those notions as part of her identity. It is, one could argue, through Mitsein that women accept “l’éternel féminin” as an essential part of themselves. Gothlin, “Beauvoir with Heidegger,” 60-61.

23 Of course, Beauvoir did not explicitly state that she wanted to characterize her literary world as Mitsein, and there is no way of knowing that she had Mitsein in mind when she wrote her novel, nor, on my reading of Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary project, does it really matter. Given Beauvoir’s later understanding of Mitsein and given the fact that she mentions having read Heidegger at the time of writing Le sang des autres in La force de l’âge, she could have been thinking of Mitsein as she fashioned Le sang des autres. But she could have also discovered her affinity with Heidegger through her experience of the war, which she then transposed into the novel, or she could have created a concept through the writing of her novel that resonates with Heidegger. This seems to be what happened with L’invitée and its philosophical intertext, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. In that case, Beauvoir had written the bulk of her novel before reading Hegel in 1940, and she had added the Hegelian epigraph to a mostly finished product. Thus, what I am arguing here is not that Beauvoir wrote a concrete example of Heideggerian Mitsein but rather that Heidegger’s Being and Time can act as a philosophical intertext to Beauvoir’s novel, one that gives us a more complete philosophical term for describing Beauvoir’s literary reality and that helps us to conceptualize the novel’s philosophical complexity.
highlights his unavoidable connection to other human beings precisely because he
inauthentically attempts to deny that he is with others; he attempts to stand outside of
Mitsein, to remove himself from the messy tangle of others’ lives. For example, because
Jean recruited Jacques to the communist cause, he feels intense remorse for the role he
played in the young man’s death. After the shock of seeing Jacques gunned down in the
street, Jean decides that action and involvement with others is too risky. “Plus jamais je
ne courrais ce risque insensé,” he declares. “Jamais je ne lèverai un doigt pour
déclencher un événement aveugle” (Le sang 146). When Hélène declares her love to him,
therefore, he shuts her out of his life because he fears a relationship with her could have
unforeseen, deleterious effects. Even when he attempts to isolate himself from Hélène,
however, he ends up harming her. Stung by his cold dismissal, Hélène takes her
revenge by sleeping with another man, “un sale type” (Le sang 123), who gets her
pregnant. The indirect result of Jean’s action is thus Hélène’s messy, painful abortion.
At her bedside, Jean tells Hélène that he had only rejected her for her own good. Hélène
replies with irony: “Vous voyez... . vous aviez mal calculé” (Le sang 126). Because he
exists, others suffer, and try as he might, Jean can never escape this fact. Even his death,
even his suicide, would reverberate, perhaps destroy lives or alter the paths taken by
others in some unforeseeable way. If he acts, he is with Jacques, Hélène, and humanity.
If he does nothing or dies, he is still with Jacques, Hélène, and humanity.
In characterizing Jean’s world as a sort of *Mitsein* that is neither inherently negative nor inherently positive, we start to understand how connection and separation fit together in the novel, particularly within the context of Beauvoir’s concept of empathy. Jean must learn to live with others who are inaccessible in the ways that Xavière was inaccessible to Françoise in *L’invitée*. Jean cannot live their suffering as they do, and so something about them escapes him. As Jean learns, however, the fact that others are inaccessible does not mean that bonds with them are impossible. These bonds assert themselves in the ways that Jean’s mere existence alters the course of others’ lives, even alters others’ conceptions of themselves, and vice versa. In other words, the other’s inaccessibility does not mean that the barrier between self and other is complete, or that shared meaning or experience cannot emerge within *Mitsein*; rather, bonds between albeit separate consciousnesses exist *a priori*, and Jean must decide how to live within them, how to fashion them and change them. If Jean is to rectify the existential anguish he feels in the face of the other’s suffering, in other words, he cannot do so by severing his bonds with humanity or with particular human beings.

Such a picture of intersubjective relations resonates with Heidegger’s characterization of *Mitsein*, for Heidegger sees a possibility for separation within *Mitsein*, but only within its bounds, never outside of them. For example, although *das Man* has the potential to overwhelm the self, I always have the power to resist convention and

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24 For an analysis of Xavière’s inaccessibility to Françoise, see pp. 51-56 of chapter 1 in this dissertation.
ready-made identities. I do not have to do things a certain way simply because that is
the way it is done. And yet resisting *das Man* does not mean I stand outside of *Mitsein*;
rather it is within my bond to others that I modify the way things are and thus act
authentically. Heidegger writes: “*Authentic Being-one’s-Self* does not rest upon an
exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the ‘they’;
*it is rather an existentiell modification of the ‘they’ – of the ‘they’ as an essential existentiale*”
(168, emphasis in the original).

Working within the bonds of *Mitsein*, however, is a demanding task when those
bonds are incomplete, when being connected to the other does not and cannot mean
*being* the other. In *Le sang des autres* the inaccessibility of the other does not, as in
*L’invitée*, pose a metaphysical problem in which the other’s consciousness rises up as a
hostile presence; rather, the inaccessibility of the other poses an ethical problem as to
how one can and should respond to the suffering of the other. Others must live with
Jean and with his decisions, his decisions may inadvertently harm them, and yet, their
suffering remains theirs, and Jean cannot completely share in it. Jean finds this fact to be
ethically unpalatable and frustrating. Hence, his empathetic imaginings of a perfect
parallel between himself and those who suffer emerge as a way of coping with his status
as a separate consciousness in a with-world. If he could just *make* the other’s suffering
his own, if he could share it completely, then at least the other would not suffer *more*
because of his existence than he does.
In the case of Louise’s baby, such an explanation may seem inadequate, but upon closer examination, it still holds. Here, Jean does not feel responsible because his actions inadvertently cause Louise’s suffering. He does nothing to bring about the baby’s death, and he could have done nothing to prevent it. If he had not existed, the baby would have died just the same. In this instance, it seems unlikely that Jean would like to establish a parallel between himself and Louise as a way of castigating himself for his share in creating her situation. Still, Beauvoir explicitly links his desire for a parallel with guilt, specifically with “la faute d’être un autre” (Le sang 18). What is it about being an other that leads to such overwhelming and unavoidable guilt?

Elaine Marks reads the origins of Jean’s guilt as a defensive tactic, both on Jean’s part and on Beauvoir’s, and she sees the pronouncement of Jean’s faute to be a philosophical obfuscation of the true horror of death, which is absolute, irrevocable, and gratuitous while it is also part of the general human condition. Marks writes: “The child cries and tears at the rug not because Louise’s baby is dead but because he can never really enter, or so he and his creator think, into this death. He cries because of his guilt. Death has, in fact, been evaded” (40). Beyond the false philosophical problem of being “un autre,” she sees Beauvoir as creating a diversion in highlighting Louise’s class, and this diversion also accounts for Jean’s guilt. In the novel, the death of Louise’s baby marked the first time that Jean had ever visited Louise’s tiny, one-room apartment, and it is true that Jean conflates Louise’s grief with her suffering due to poverty. In the eyes
of the bourgeois child, the small, dingy space appears to be almost as scandalous as the baby stiff with meningitis. “Death and injustice have been assimilated,” Marks writes, “and death, by this assimilation, has lost its sting” (Marks) (39). After visiting Louise’s apartment, then, Jean feels guilty for being bourgeois, for having wealth and comfort when others do not, and, according to Marks, he has failed to react appropriately (ethically?) to Louise’s real suffering.

What Marks is asking for Beauvoir to provide through Jean – “an uncluttered view of death” (41) and a “real apprehension of suffering” (Marks 41) – seems at once vague and germane to the ethical question at hand. How should Jean have reacted to Louise’s grief? What would “an uncluttered view of death” or a “real apprehension of suffering” entail, and what do we make of Beauvoir’s implied assertion that Jean will always remain outside of Louise’s suffering, that he will always be separate from her in that moment? These distinct questions that emerge through Marks’s analysis highlight the ways in which Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary project diverges from Heidegger’s purely philosophical one. For Beauvoir, Mitsein simply is, but this only acts as a starting point for her ethical questioning, which revolves around finding an authentic way to respond to the suffering of the other, to express empathy within Mitsein. This is Beauvoirian Mitsein, for Beauvoir takes advantage of the ethical potential that Heidegger
leaves lying mostly dormant in Being and Time, and she applies this ethical potential to her characters’ distinct political situations.  

On my reading of the novel, Beauvoir eventually casts Jean’s reaction to Louise’s suffering as a case of mauvaise foi, but not because of the nature or origin of his guilt. Before this event, Jean had mostly believed what his bourgeois Christian upbringing taught him. Others suffered, Jean thought, so that he and his mother could fulfill their charitable, Christian duty of relieving that suffering, and their suffering was somehow part of the natural order of things:

Quelquefois elle [sa mère] emmenait Jean voir ses pauvres ; . . . ils remerciaient poliment pour le bel ours en peluche ou le petit tablier propre, ils ne semblaient pas malheureux. Les mendians en haillons accroupis sur les trottoirs n’étaient pas inquiétants non plus ; . . . ils occupaient dans la rue une place aussi naturelle que le chameau dans le désert, qu’en Chine les Chinois nattés. Et les histoires qu’on entendait raconter sur les vagabonds poétiques, sur les touchants petits orphelins, finissaient toujours par des larmes de joie, des mains serrées, du linge frais, du pain doré. La misère ne semblait exister que pour être soulagée, pour laisser aux petits garçons riches le plaisir de donner. (Le sang 15)

Jean thus brings toys and clothes to the poor and sees them on the sidewalks without completely feeling remorse even though, as is always the case with mauvaise foi, he knows that “il y avait autre chose” (Le sang 15). With her reference to the stories he reads in “les livres dorés sur tranche” (Le sang 15), Beauvoir reinforces Jean’s false belief that the poor are in some sense destined to be poor, that some kind of necessity has

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25 This is once again an insistence on the fact that for Beauvoir, political decisions arise out of ethical frameworks.
placed them there just as it has placed camels in the desert. As Beauvoir and Sartre have argued, books and art carry with them their own sense of necessity; they impose order and meaning on the fictionalized human experience and present to the reader or the viewer only the salient points of the narrative.\(^\text{26}\) Hence the books that young Jean reads reconfirm his sense that a natural, divine presence has ordered the world just so, that suffering may exist but that it was meant to exist and would, in the end, be alleviated.

What the death of Louise’s baby destroys is just this storyline of natural suffering and redemption that Jean had told himself in order to evade his guilt. He realizes that no amount of charity can help Louise or her baby. “Je pouvais bien vider ma tirelire, et maman pouvait veiller des nuits entières : il serait toujours aussi mort” (Le sang 16). In this scene, necessity or God has suddenly dropped out from underneath Beauvoir’s young protagonist. He grasps this death as being utterly contingent and irrevocable. It does not fit into a narrative which will make sense. This, I would argue, is an uncluttered view of death, and because of this view, the weight of responsibility for the suffering of others suddenly comes crashing down upon this world, upon Jean as he struggles to bring meaning to the chaos, to impose his own narrative. Thus Jean suddenly feels that the death of Louise’s baby implicates him not because he has caused the baby’s death but because his mere existence as a bourgeois child contributes to a

\(^{26}\) Jean-Paul Sartre, La nausée (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). contains the best example of this sense of necessity in novels and art, for a hope that art will impose some kind of necessity upon Roquentin’s contingent existence fosters his love for jazz while at the same time Sartre lifts sections from books like Eugénie Grandet and places them in his text to show the difference between his narrative and the typical realist narrative that does not account for contingency.
system in which entire families must live in dilapidated, one-room apartments.\textsuperscript{27}

Beauvoir’s connection between senseless death and social injustice does not elide the true nature of death; instead this experience of utterly contingent death and suffering reveals that the responsibility for avoidable suffering – like the suffering of the poor - rests squarely upon the shoulders of those who live in this world, particularly those who live well in this world because of others’ suffering.

Again, Jean’s anguish comes not only from his mere existence as an other but rather as an other within Mitsein. This, I believe, is “l’absolue pourriture cachée au sein de tout destin humain” (Le sang 12). We are separate but this does not mean that we do not share a world with the other; we cannot enter completely into the other’s suffering, but this does not mean that we have no connection to it. While Marks inserts her skeptical “or so he and his creator think” into her statement that Jean cannot enter into Louise’s baby’s death, I would like to affirm this fact as incontrovertible. At least, Jean cannot enter into the baby’s death in the way that he wants to, which is to say, completely.

\section*{4.5 The Aggression at the Heart of Empathy: Finding an Ethical Response to the Suffering of the Other}

As a response to the other’s suffering, this tendency in Jean to imagine that there is no boundary between the other and the self not only proves impossible; it also proves

\textsuperscript{27} This scene thus resonates with some of Beauvoir’s writing on existentialist ethics in \textit{Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté}. Contrary to the popular belief that no morality is possible without God, Beauvoir argues that only in a world without God does true moral responsibility for what happens in the world reside with men and women and not with some external force. Beauvoir, \textit{Pour une morale} 21-22.
to be ethically problematic in its own right. In fact, Jean has several bad faith responses to the uncomfortable fact of *Mitsein*, one of which is complete abstention from others’ lives while the other actually is the empathetic impulse to abolish alterity. There is something quite violent in this attempt, and the moment in which Jean would like to hear the blood rushing through Hélène’s head drives this point home: “Il fallait pénétrer de force jusqu’en son cœur, déchirer les brouillards et l’obliger à m’écouter, la supplier: reste vivante, reviens-moi” (*Le sang* 70). Most of the verbs in this sentence are quite aggressive – pénétrer, déchirer, obliger - and despite the milder “supplier,” Jean still ends his thoughts with a command. Empathy in Beauvoir’s novel, in other words, has an unexpected and mysterious aggressive edge, one that does not emerge in most critical discussions of solidarity in *Le sang des autres*.28

On this point Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary text departs from or seriously alters Heidegger’s discussion of *Mitsein* while still remaining in dialogue with it. Heidegger brings up empathy in *Being and Time* in order to demonstrate that traditional philosophical treatments of the subject start with a false solipsistic picture of human

28 A reading of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Tous les hommes sont mortels* reinforces this notion of overbearing empathy. In particular, in Beauvoir’s section on “Le dévouement” in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, she discusses how devotion to loved ones (children, lovers, etc.) can denigrate into tyranny as one starts to decide for the other what his or her best interest is. Beauvoir writes: “Non seulement le dévouement n’est pas une démission, mais bien souvent il prend une figure hargneuse et tyrannique : c’est sans lui, c’est contre lui que nous voulons le bien d’autrui.” Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus* 267. In *Tous les hommes sont mortels*, the immortal Fosca decides that he is going to live for the happiness of his son and his adopted daughter, and yet this drive to protect them and to give them everything they could possibly want and need becomes suffocating to the two young people who want to do things for themselves, even if their decisions lead to suffering, failure, and heartache. Beauvoir, *Tous les hommes* 190-216.
relations in which “‘the psychical life of Others’” (161) becomes a problem for the philosopher. As Heidegger puts it:

This phenomenon [a disclosure of the Other], which is none too happily designated as “empathy” [“Einfühlung”] is then supposed, as it were, to provide the first ontological bridge from one’s own subject, which is given proximally as alone, to the other subject, which is proximally quite closed off. (162)

For Heidegger, this picture of empathy misconstrues how human beings connect to one another for it starts with a radical separation between subjects who do not and cannot in any way share a world and who then make a connection through a sort of analogy or, as Heidegger puts it, “a Projection of one’s own Being-towards-onself ‘into something else’” (162). In this way of understanding how one person connects to another, Heidegger claims, “The Other would be a duplicate of the Self” (162). Heidegger then dismisses such an account for two reasons, one of which is the assumption that human beings begin with radical, metaphysical separation. Instead they feel their separation in the deficient modes of Mitsein and then attempt to overcome those deficient modes by disclosing the self to the other. Heidegger concludes:

Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, already is with Others. “Empathy” does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does “empathy” become possible: it gets its motivation from the unsociability of the dominant modes of Being-with. (Heidegger 162)

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20 Heidegger is not quoting another philosopher here. On my reading of this passage, Heidegger puts “the psychical life of Others” in quotation marks in order to designate that this is a concept or concern that makes sense within other philosophical systems but not his own.
Here again, Heidegger is arguing that the feeling of separation emerges and can only emerge within *Mitsein* and thus a true disclosure of the self to the other can only happen within *Mitsein* rather than outside of it.

In Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary world, feeling separate from the other first occurs in *Mitsein*, and yet this experience leads Jean to attempt to correct that separation in a way that Heidegger did not imagine he would. For Heidegger, the fantasy that one can overcome separation by imagining the other as a “duplicate of the Self” (162) is a philosopher’s theoretical fantasy. And yet, Beauvoir shows this to be a real (albeit impossible) impulse in everyday encounters, one that her readers may recognize from those moments in their own lives when they sense that perhaps they do not feel enough for the other’s suffering, when they try to force themselves to feel more for the other and feel guilty that they cannot. In these intense empathetic moments, Jean tries to project himself into the other, to imagine that there is no subjective distance between himself and the other. If Beauvoir characterizes this as violent or aggressive, it is because empathy here becomes one of the deficient modes of *Mitsein* in which “[solicitude] can, as it were, take away ‘care’ from the Other and put itself in his position in concern: it can leap in for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the other that with which he is to concern himself” (158). This is exactly Jean’s attitude when a serious consequence of his existence affects those around him. Leaping in for the other, he attempts to take all
responsibility upon himself, assuming both his share of the blame and the share of others.

In a way, such an act seems valiant and selfless, and yet, in denying separation, Jean also unknowingly denies the other’s subjectivity. Every time that Hélène suffers, for example, the burden of blame always rests squarely on his shoulders, as if she had never acted or chosen at all. In his mind, she figures as the object that his subjectivity molds. He never once stops to consider that she could mold herself or that she could mold him. Ultimately, he falls into the same philosophical trap that Moi ascribes to Sartre. He believes that he “write[s] himself on to the world without ever admitting that the world also writes itself onto him” (*Intellectual Woman* 165).

Jean thus finds himself at an impasse. He cannot disentangle himself from the lives of others, and yet he cannot completely connect to the other either. Left somewhere in a moral limbo, he does not seem able to find an adequate response to the novel’s implied question: how do we authentically respond to the suffering of the other? As Terry Keefe points out, however, writers like Blanchot may have been justified in taking issue with the ending of *Le sang des autres*, for in the final scene Beauvoir allows Jean to find a way out of his moral dilemma, which leads to a ringing sense of absolution and ethical certainty for her male protagonist. According to Keefe, the novel’s “moral issues, conflicts and dilemmas. . . are themselves. . . well brought out as problems lending themselves to no easy answers. . . . It is because they are so well brought out that the
alleged ‘solution’ to everything at the end of the book seems overneat and inadequate” 
("Literature and Existentialist Ethics" 259, emphasis in the original).

There is no doubt that the end of the novel does offer a solution to Jean’s problems with empathy. In Beauvoir’s ethical analysis of how one should live within Mitsein, Jean must acknowledge the shared nature of his world. He must acknowledge not only that he founds the other’s situation but that the other is freely taking that situation up as a point of departure and altering its meaning. This, I believe, is the profound revelation at the end of Le sang des autres, a revelation asserted by Hélène in her dying moments. Although Jean gave Hélène a connection to the Resistance, and although he decided to send her on the dangerous mission that would lead to her fatal injury, Hélène forcefully rejects his impulse to shoulder the responsibility all on his own. She had decided to join the Resistance. She had wanted to risk her life on that mission, and these decisions marked for her a newfound assertion of her freedom that Jean, with all his paralyzing guilt, has failed to recognize. She thus demands that he recognize her as transcendence, that he recognize himself as an object in her life whose influence is that of a stone, of a brute contingency; she demands that he allow her to assume her responsibility. “N’aie surtout pas de remords,” she says. “J’ai fait ce que j’ai voulu. Tu étais tout juste une pierre. Des pierres, il en faut pour faire des routes, sans ça comment pourrait-on se choisir un chemin” (Le sang 307)?
This does not mean, however, that Jean remains completely without guilt. After Hélène makes this demand of Jean, he recognizes the ambiguity of his situation:

“Comme si j’étais rien. Rien et toutes choses ; présent à tous les hommes à travers le monde tout entier, et séparé d’eux à jamais ; coupable et innocent comme le caillou sur la route. Si lourd et sans aucun poids” (Le sang 309). If Jean is guilty and innocent, it is because in Hélène’s world he was both a subject and an object at once; if he is heavy, it is because he weighed upon her, but as he recognizes her ability to act on her own, he is also without weight. What Beauvoir provides her reader here is the first glimpse of what she eventually calls a “reciprocal relationship,” her interpersonal ideal posited at the end of Le deuxième sexe in which, as Nancy Bauer puts it, “two people manage to bear their own ambiguity in relation to one another, each. . . experienc[ing] both himself or herself and the other person as a subject and object reciprocally, *at the same time*” ("Allure" 272, emphasis in the original).

This, then, is Beauvoir’s moral resolution to the problems of empathy in Mitsein, and if critics have taken issue with it, it is because they feel that literature should only bring out ambiguous moral problems but never offer solutions. And yet, Beauvoir’s solution reaffirms the *ambiguity* that the rest of the novel was working to build. On Hélène’s deathbed, reciprocity is achieved, and it is achieved through Jean’s decision to
allow separation and connection to be. By not working to deny either, Jean, in Beauvoir’s existentialist terminology, assumes a fundamental human ambiguity. What we must accept is that all we can do is lean in over the death bed of the other; this does not mean that we should ignore the other and do nothing nor does it mean that we should expect the impossible unity that would wipe away any difference between us.

We must accept an imperfect knowledge of the other, a knowledge that the other is in pain and that there are some things we can do to assuage that pain, but that we cannot live that pain. If Jean were able to completely share Hélène’s pain, he would in fact be overtaking her pain for her, usurping it as his own, yes, but also erasing her in the process.

If her pain becomes so intelligible to him that it is his, if he can “pénétrer jusqu’en son sou

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30 This is also an assertion that Beauvoir makes in Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté: “Ce n’est qu’en tant qu’étranger, interdit, en tant que libre, que l’autre se dévoile comme autre ; et l’aimer authentiquement, c’est l’aimer dans son altérité et dans cette liberté par laquelle il s’échappe.” Beauvoir, Pour une morale 85.

31 There are a whole host of readings of this ending that do not see the resolution of Jean and Hélène’s problems in such a positive light. Some critics have claimed that Jean and Hélène were both in bad faith at the end of the novel because they ignore or elide Jean’s guilt in Hélène’s death and in the death of hostages that will result from Jean’s final decision to continue Resistance action (a decision catalyzed in many ways by Jean’s breakthrough with Hélène). In other words, they believe Beauvoir’s resolution was too neat and Jean’s absolution too complete. See, for example, Miyasaki, “Violence Politique.” Such readings, however, seem to rely on highlighting one side of the ambiguous reality that Jean has finally accepted in this scene. At the end, Jean does not see himself as guilt-free or completely weightless; instead he recognizes that, as an object and a subject in Hélène’s life, he is both guilty and innocent, both intrusive into Hélène’s life and an object that she uses to express her own freedom. Other critics have more substantiated concerns. They take issue with the fact that moral certainty for Beauvoir’s male protagonist must come at the expense of her female protagonist’s death. For example, Elizabeth Fallaize writes: “The sacrifice of the main female character on the altar of the political and moral education of the male hero means that the woman - the ‘Other’ - is again destroyed in this text, as Xavière is destroyed in She Came to Stay, this time in the interests of commitment.” Fallaize, Novels 64. While such readings should certainly give us pause in affirming the ending as a positive resolution of the problem of empathy, I believe we should not ignore the importance in Beauvoir’s philosophy both of being able to risk one’s life and being able to assume the responsibility of one’s actions. Hélène’s death provides a vehicle through which she can unequivocally assert herself as a free woman. Not that all women should have to die to be free, but they should, in Beauvoir’s world, be able to assume the risk and its consequences.
cœur” (Le sang 70) to the point that it becomes indistinguishable from his, then her otherness, her unique subjectivity fades away.

While this may constitute an ethical argument in Le sang des autres, therefore, it does not destroy Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary ambiguity, and Beauvoir still leaves room for her novel to act as an appeal to her reader’s freedom. As in Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, the novel in fact offers only guidelines but never steadfast, everlasting moral tenets in which, for example, engaging in violence is always bad or good. Beauvoir writes: “La morale, pas plus que la science et l’art, ne fournissent des recettes. On peut proposer seulement des méthodes” (Pour une morale 166). Beauvoir’s novel affirms that you must find a way to negotiate our solidarity -or, if you would like, the human Mitsein – such that you do not act within the deficient modes laid out by Heidegger including not only indifference or quietism but also jumping in for the other. You cannot lack empathy, but you most certainly cannot use your empathy as an excuse for denying the other’s subjectivity and freedom. This is a decidedly anti-humanist stance if we take humanism to mean that we should care for other human beings because they are exactly like us. Or perhaps it would be better to say that this is a humanist stance that corrects some of the previous mistakes of humanism: namely the assumption that saying that the other is my fellow means eliminating all subjective distance between us, that it means denying that the other is other. For Beauvoir, the only authentic way to say that the other is like me entails accepting that the other is free and essential like me and thus
(almost paradoxically) that the other is not me. And yet, in this affirmation, she does not tell her reader how this negotiation will work in everyday life or in particular situations. Those kinds of moral decisions still remain with the reader herself when she comes upon the suffering of the other, when she is confronted with misery and with the proper way to express her empathy.

4.6 Conclusion: The Literary Scene as a Privileged Space for Unveiling Ethics

It is no coincidence that Beauvoir’s philosophical-literary ambiguity proves strongest within specific scenes of the novel rather than within the overall synopsis of Beauvoir’s plot. This is because one of Beauvoir’s assets as a novelist is the way in which she writes scenes such that human meaning coalesces with the actual events being described. Hence, Jean’s experience of empathy proves complex because he, as a particular individual, lives these moments as both affirming his separation and his connection to others. The literary form allows the reader to enter his thoughts, to get a “taste of his life” as he watches others suffer. In this way, a beautifully ambiguous picture of how human beings live empathy emerges, and this picture opens out onto questions of how we should react in the face of the suffering of the other.

A quick comparison between Le sang des autres and Beauvoir’s play, Les bouches inutiles, drives this point home. In La Force de l’âge Beauvoir writes not only that Les

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32 This is an intuition, I would argue, that Beauvoir began building in the individual world of L’invitée, that becomes clearer in the social world of Le sang des autres, and that feeds into her demand that men and women find their way toward reciprocity in Le deuxième sexe.
bouches inutiles suffers from the same problems as Le sang des autres but also that theater proves to be a less forgiving medium for these kinds of mistakes than the novel. In Les bouches inutiles, Beauvoir picks up a story that she read in history books of a medieval town under siege and facing sure starvation. The men in this town must decide whether or not to sacrifice the useless mouths (les bouches inutiles) to the greater good of preserving the free town that they were fighting to build. The moral quandary shifts a little in this play to a question about the relationship between ends and means: how could the men in a village sacrifice their women and children to the ideal of a free and equitable society when their sacrifice flies in the face of those ideals? Still, the question of the suffering of the other and of the proper response to that suffering remains, and at the end, Beauvoir affirms solidarity between the citizens of Vaucelles as a positive moral choice. If the theatrical form is less forgiving, however, I would argue that it is because the play does not allow the spectator to enter into the characters’ minds as easily as the novel does. The spectators of Les bouches inutiles thus do not see how living in the face of the others’ suffering brings about at once feelings of separation and solidarity, how both feelings could overwhelm the characters, and how the appropriate recognition of this ambiguity could lessen that burden and lead to moral decisions such as the one made at the end of Le sang des autres. The play, in other words, does not lend itself to unveiling its meanings as human meanings, as being part of la réalité humaine.
Beauvoir’s novel would thus call out to its reader to recognize that they live within *Mitsein* just as Jean does and that living within *Mitsein* poses important ethical problems for their empathetic relations again just as it does for Jean. Beauvoir presents her reader with Jean’s truth as an act of faith and asks the reader to see it as her truth as well. This truth of Beauvoirian *Mitsein* will become one of the founding concepts in Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics. *Mitsein* allows Beauvoir to account for the ways that others write themselves onto the subject without denying that the subject still exists. Ethically speaking, *Mitsein* creates the parameters within which all human beings must make choices and create values. It must be a human *Mitsein*. In order to create an ethics out of this fact, human beings must bring their own meanings to their shared situation. Beauvoir thus builds within *Le sang des autres* an intersubjective ideal that will found her ideal for the relationship between writer and reader. Ironically, then, within *Le sang des autres* Beauvoir lays the foundation for an aesthetic ideal that the novel itself – because of particular features of the plot – will fail to fulfill completely.
Conclusion

In this dissertation I have sketched two major developments in Simone de Beauvoir’s aesthetic thought, both of which help to define her contribution to the question of what philosophical literature is and what it can do. The first development is her idea that philosophical literature should not make an argument as in a philosophical system; rather philosophical literature should remain an ambiguous description of the ways in which a particular subjectivity lives his or her réalité humaine. In this way, philosophical literature retains the distinct advantage of all literary works, which constitute a particularly strong appeal to the reader’s freedom. If the complexities, opacity, and contradictions of the imagined lived experience do not allow for an argument, they allow for the creation of shared meaning that is the ideal of Beauvoirian ethics, and thus philosophical-literary works are Beauvoir’s preferred form of writing. The second development is her assertion that literature can constitute a real ethical and ethico-political intervention in the world without losing its literary strengths, without devolving into a roman à thèse. As early as “Littérature et métaphysique,” Beauvoir was describing the philosophical-literary text as a dévoilement of how the world is. This concept, according to which meaning in the world is first and foremost human meaning, clearly made possible Sartre’s famous formulation of literary words as actions in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? Without the twin concepts of literature as an appeal and literature as
an unveiling, literature could not engage normative ethics; instead it would have to argue for objective truths and thus ruin the open ambiguity of the literary work.

After uncovering Beauvoir’s acuity as a philosophical-literary theorist, I then undertook two serious studies of philosophical-literary criticism, one of Beauvoir’s first novel, *L’invitée* and the other of her second novel, *Le sang des autres*. I did these studies with Beauvoirian aesthetic principles in mind and with a sense that theory about novels cannot live outside of the novels themselves. Approaching the novels from the perspective of existentialist aesthetics opened the door to fresh readings of Beauvoir’s early fiction and giving up on the search for an authoritative or preexisting philosophical argument allowed for a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory philosophical meanings to flourish. These contradictory literary meanings show philosophy as part of the imagined literary world, thus as being anchored in the concrete but also in the style, themes, and beauty that makes a novel. My readings of Beauvoir’s novels also showed how her philosophical-literary works could speak to the philosophical tradition even as they pushed the boundaries of traditional conceptions of what philosophy is. These conversations with other philosophical works – the works of Descartes, Sartre, Diderot, and Heidegger – show how Beauvoir does not engage her philosophical predecessors and fellows with the intention of fully supporting or tearing down their systems; rather in her philosophical novels, she actively reworks them from the inside out.
In focusing here on Beauvoir’s formative years and in focusing on her fiction, I have obviously omitted some of the important developments in her later philosophical-literary work, and I have not addressed the other literary forms in Beauvoir’s heterogeneous oeuvre including her autobiography, autobiographical travelogues, and essays. Underlying a future iteration of this project would thus be questions about how Beauvoir conceives of her essays as being literary works and how her concept of the philosophical-literary novel feeds into the writing of a committed essay like *Le deuxième sexe*. Defining “literary qualities” as the qualities that Beauvoir prized in her aesthetic writings on philosophical literature, which of these qualities emerge in her essays, from *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* to *Le deuxième sexe*? My preliminary intuition tells me that the major shift between her “moral essays” and her feminist masterwork would occur in Beauvoir’s shift from using the phenomenological anecdote to underlie her philosophical assertions to using narratives of lived experience, from biographical and psychoanalytic accounts to fiction.

Given Beauvoir’s incorporation of philosophical-literary analyses of others’ fictional works, this study of the literary qualities of Beauvoir’s essays could also examine how Beauvoir practices the kind of reading that she asks for in “Littérature et métaphysique.” In other words, Beauvoir is a constant critic of her own fiction in her memoirs, and she consistently includes criticism of others’ novels in such varied places as her political essay “Idéalisme moral et réalisme politique,” her feminist masterpiece
Le deuxième sexe, and her complete analysis of Sade’s oeuvre in “Faut-il brûler Sade?” In this way, my project could look at Beauvoir as a practitioner of philosophical-literary criticism.

Of course, this work will not be complete without an analysis of what is arguably Beauvoir’s best novel, Les mandarins, perhaps placed alongside La femme rompue and Les belles images. Taking Beauvoir’s statement in her letter to Nelson Algren that she would not know where to start in writing a new novel because she had not succeeded in accurately portraying “her own way of feeling,” this chapter on Beauvoir’s post-Deuxième sexe novels would ask how she took up the project to write philosophical fiction again and how her novels evolve beyond these first attempts to treat both love and ethics as philosophically significant questions in a novel. By the time Beauvoir writes Les mandarins, love has become a rather recognizable story of two lovers who cannot be together and the question of intellectual engagement has become a very practical question of how much impact intellectuals can have on their world. The difficulty for the philosophical-literary critic here is thus whether her philosophical preoccupations surrounding love and ethical intervention have seriously changed or even disappeared.

Finally, this work on Beauvoir could take her autobiographical accounts of empathy and put them into dialogue with her fictional accounts of empathy in order to better explore what aesthetic benefits Beauvoir sees in the autobiographical form. These
accounts would include scenes in \textit{L’Amérique au jour le jour} and in Beauvoir’s memoirs where she must face the suffering of blacks in the Jim Crow South. They would also include Beauvoir’s two accounts of losing loved ones: her mother in \textit{Une mort très douce} and Sartre in \textit{La cérémonie des adieux}. What would Beauvoir like to tell her readers about empathy in these autobiographical works, and does her form change what she can tell the philosophical tradition about this concept.

Future work on this project could also involve more meticulously situating Beauvoir’s existentialist aesthetics in the context of the larger aesthetic trends of the late 19th and 20th century. My dissertation already includes discussions of Jean-Paul Sartre’s aesthetic beliefs, but these discussions are by no means complete. Furthermore, this look at Beauvoir’s existentialist aesthetics could open out onto other existentialist conceptions of art, including those of Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Having established Beauvoir as a philosophical-literary critic – in other words as a literary analyst who reads philosophically - I could read her in the context of similar philosophical aesthetic criticisms such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s readings of Flaubert’s work or of films and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s reading of \textit{L’invitée} in “Le roman et la métaphysique” or his evaluation of Cézanne’s paintings in “Le doube de Cézanne.”

Establishing what demands existentialist aesthetics make of art, I could perhaps posit that the narrative of aesthetics as moving from modernism to post-modernism skips over this significant vision of art, literary and otherwise. I would thus engage
more deeply with critics like Nussbaum, Cavell, and Murdoch, who talk specifically about philosophical literature and to whom I have merely made a gesture in my introduction. I would also further examine the existentialist answer to the question of whether or not literature should have a purpose outside of itself in comparison to other aesthetic trends, from realism to post-modernism.

My introduction to this dissertation argued that Beauvoir’s existentialist aesthetics ask literary scholars, philosophers, and feminists to reconsider an implicit hierarchy between literature and philosophy in which philosophy constitutes a higher (male) domain and literature a lower domain into which women are, more or less, accepted. Hopefully my analysis and the force of Beauvoir’s work have convincingly shown that we should reconsider the implied relationship between philosophy and literature that underlies such an unfortunate hierarchy. The hope here is that more philosophers will pick up novels like those written by Beauvoir in their search for answers to questions about solipsism and love, conflict and recognition. The hope is also that in recognizing the complex demands that Beauvoir makes of literature and how she sees the literary art reaching beyond itself, modern literary critics will no longer allow aesthetic notions and writings like Beauvoir’s to sit on the shelf, gathering dust.
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Biography

Ashley King Scheu was born in Columbus, OH on December 30, 1978. She received her bachelor’s degree in French and English from Davidson College in 2001. She received her master’s degree in French from the Department of Romance Studies at Duke University in 2006 and will be receiving her Doctor of Philosophy in 2011. She has a publication, *The Viability of the Philosophical Novel: The Case of Simone de Beauvoir*, forthcoming in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. 